

A photograph of a person wearing a pink headscarf and a black long-sleeved shirt, riding a camel across a vast, sandy desert. The camel is facing away from the camera, and the rider is looking towards the horizon. In the background, there are rolling sand dunes and distant, hazy mountains under a clear sky. The overall tone is warm and golden, typical of a desert sunset or sunrise.

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CRAWFORD***

***KHALED,
A TALE
OF ARABIA***

F. Marion Crawford

Khaled, A Tale of Arabia

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CHAPTER I

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Khaled stood in the third heaven, which is the heaven of precious stones, and of Asrael, the angel of Death. In the midst of the light shed by the fruit of the trees Asrael himself is sitting, and will sit until the day of the resurrection from the dead, writing in his book the names of those who are to be born, and blotting out the names of those who have lived their years and must die. Each of the trees has seventy thousand branches, each branch bears seventy thousand fruits, each fruit is composed of seventy thousand diamonds, rubies, emeralds, carbuncles, jacinths, and other precious stones. The stature and proportions of Asrael are so great that his eyes are seventy thousand days' journey apart, the one from the other.

Khaled stood motionless during ten months and thirteen days, waiting until Asrael should rest from his writing and look towards him. Then came the holy night called Al Kadr, the night of peace in which the Koran came down from heaven. Asrael paused, and raising his eyes from the scroll saw Khaled standing before him.

Asrael knew Khaled, who was one of the genii converted to the faith on hearing Mohammed read the Koran by night in the valley Al Nakhlah. He wondered, however, when he saw him standing in his presence; for the genii are not allowed to pass even the gate of the first heaven, in which the stars hang by chains of gold, each star being inhabited by an angel who guards the entrance against the approach of devils.

Asrael looked at Khaled in displeasure, therefore, supposing that he had eluded the heavenly sentinels and concealed an evil purpose. But Khaled inclined himself respectfully.

'There is no Allah but Allah. Mohammed is the prophet of Allah,' he said, thus declaring himself to be of the Moslem genii, who are upright and are true believers.

'How camest thou hither?' asked Asrael.

'By the will of Allah, who sent his angel with me to the gate,' Khaled answered. 'I am come hither that thou mayest write down my name in the book of life and death, that I may be a man on earth, and after an appointed time thou shalt blot it out again and I shall die.'

Asrael gazed at him and knew that this was the will of Allah, for the angels are thus immediately made conscious of the divine commands. He took up his pen to write, but before he had traced the first letter he paused.

'This is the night Al Kadr,' he said. 'If thou wilt, tell me therefore thy story, for I am now at leisure to hear it.'

'Thou knowest that I am of the upright genii,' Khaled answered, 'and I am well disposed towards men. In the city of Riad, in Arabia, there rules a powerful king, the Sultan of the kingdom of Nejed, blessed in all things save that he has no son to inherit his vast dominions. One daughter only has been born to him in his old age, of such marvellous beauty that even the Black Eyed Virgins enclosed in the fruit of the tree Sedrat, who wait for the coming of the faithful, would seem but mortal women beside her. Her eyes are as the deep water in the wells of Zobeideh when it is night and the stars are reflected therein. Her hair is finer than silk, red

with henna, and abundant as the foliage of the young cypress tree. Her face is as fair as the kernels of young almonds, and her mouth is sweeter than the mellow date and more fragrant than 'Ood mingled with ambergris. She possesses moreover all the virtues which become women, for she is as modest as she is beautiful and as charitable as she is modest. From all parts of Arabia and Egypt, and from Syria and from Persia, and even from Samarkand, from Afghanistan, and from India princes and kings' sons continually come to ask her in marriage, for the fame of her beauty and of her virtues is as wide as the world. But her father, desiring only her happiness, leaves the choice of a husband to herself, and for a long time she refused all her suitors. For there is in the palace at Riad a certain secret chamber from which she can observe all those who come and hear their conversation and see the gifts which they bring with them.

'At last there came as a suitor an unbeliever, a prince of an island by the shores of India, beautiful as the moon, whose speech was honey, and who surpassed all the suitors in riches and in the magnificence of the presents he brought. For he came bearing with him a hundred pounds' weight of pure gold, and five hundred ounces of ambergris, and a great weight of musk and aloes and sandal wood, and rich garments without number, and many woven shawls of Kashmir, of which the least splendid was valued at a thousand sherifs of gold. An innumerable retinue accompanied him, and twenty elephants, and horses without number, besides camels.

'The Sultan's daughter beheld this beautiful prince from her secret hiding-place, and all that he had brought with him. The Sultan received him with kindness and hospitality, but assured him that unless he would renounce idolatry and embrace the true faith he could not hope to succeed in his purpose. Thereupon he was much cast down, and soon afterwards, having received magnificent gifts in his turn, he would have departed on his way, disappointed and heavy at heart. But Zehowah sent for her father and entreated him to bid the young prince remain. "For it is not impossible," she said, "that he may yet be converted to the true faith. And have I the right to refuse to sacrifice my freedom when the sacrifice may be the means of converting an idolater to the right way? And if I marry him and go with him to his kingdom, shall we not make true believers of all his subjects, so that I shall deserve to be called the mother of the faithful like Ayesha, beloved by the Prophet, upon whom be peace?" The Sultan found it hard to oppose this argument which was founded upon virtue and edified in righteousness. He therefore entreated the Indian prince to remain and to profess Islam, promising the hand of Zehowah when he should be converted.

'Then I heard the prince taking secret counsel with a certain old man who was with him, who shaved his face and wore white clothing and ate food which he prepared for himself alone. The prince told all, and then the old man counselled him in this way. "Speak whatsoever words they require of thee," he said, "for words are but garments wherewith to make the nakedness of truth modest and agreeable. And take the woman, and by and by, when we

are returned to our own land, if she consent to worship thy gods, it is good; and if not, it is yet good, for thou shalt possess her as thy wife, and her unbelief shall be of consequence only to her own soul, but thy soul shall not be retarded in its progress." And the young prince was pleased, and promised to do as his counsellor advised him.

'So I saw that he was false and that Zehowah's righteousness would be but the means to her sorrow if she were allowed to persist. Therefore in the night, when all were asleep in the palace, I entered into the room where the prince was lying, and I took him in my arms and flew with him to the midst of the Red Desert, and there I slew him and buried him in the sand, for I saw that he was a liar and had determined to be a hypocrite.

'But Allah immediately sent an angel to destroy me because I had put to death a man who was about to become a believer, thereby killing his soul also, since he had not yet made profession of the faith. But I stood up and defended myself, saying that I had slain a hypocrite who had planned in his heart to carry away the daughter of a Moslem. Then the angel asked the truth of the prince's soul, which was sitting upon the red sand that covered the body. The soul answered, weeping, and said: "These are true words, and I am fuel for hell." "Have I then deserved death?" I asked. "I have killed an unbeliever." The angel answered that I had deserved life; and he would have left me and returned to paradise, but I would not let him go, and I besought him to entreat Allah that I might be allowed to live the life of a mortal man upon earth. "For," I said, "thou sayest that I deserve life. But even if thou destroy me not now I am only

one of the genii, who shall all die at the first blast of the trumpet before the resurrection of the dead. Obtain for me therefore that I may have a soul and live a few years, and if I do good I shall then be with the faithful in paradise; and if not, I shall be bound with red-hot chains and burn everlastingly like a sinful man." The angel promised to intercede for me and departed. So I sat down upon the mound of red sand beside the soul of the Indian prince, to wait for the angel's coming again.

'Then the soul reproached me angrily. "But for thee," it said, "I should have married Zehowah and returned to my own people, and although I purposed to be a hypocrite, yet in time Zehowah might have convinced me and I should have believed in my heart. For I now see that there is no Allah but Allah, and that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah. And I should perhaps have died full of years, a good Moslem, and should have entered paradise. Therefore I pray Allah that this may be remembered in thy condemnation." At these words I was very angry and reviled the soul, scoffing at it. "No doubt Allah will hear thy prayer," I answered, "and will hear also at the same time thy lies. And as for Zehowah, thinkest thou that she would have loved thee, even if she had married thee? I tell thee that her soul rejoices only in the light of the faith, and that although she might have married thee, she would have done so in the hope of turning thy people from the worship of false gods and not for love of thee. For she will never love any man." When I had said this the soul groaned aloud and then remained silent.

'In a little while the angel came back, and I saw that his face was no longer clouded with anger. "Hear the judgment of Allah," he said. "Inasmuch as thou tookest the law upon thyself, which belonged to Allah alone, thou deservest to die. But in so far as thou hast indeed slain a hypocrite and an unbeliever thou hast earned life. Allah is just, merciful and forgiving. It is not meet that in thy lot there should be nothing but reward or nothing but punishment. Therefore thou shalt not yet receive a soul. Go hence to the third heaven and when the angel Asrael shall be at leisure he will write thy name in the book of the living. Then thou shalt return hither and go into the city of Riad bearing gifts. And Zehowah will accept thee in marriage, though she love thee not, for Allah commands that it be so. But if in the course of time this virtuous woman be moved to love, and say to thee, 'Khaled, I love thee,' then at that moment thou shalt receive an immortal soul, and if thy deeds be good thy soul shall enter paradise with the believers, but if not, thou shalt burn. Thus saith Allah. Thus art thou rewarded, indeed, but wisely and temperately, since thou hast not obtained life directly, but only the hope of life." Then the angel departed again, leading the way.

'But the soul mocked me. "Thou that sayest of Zehowah that she will never love any man, thou art fallen into thine own trap," it cried. "For now, if she love thee not thou must perish. Truly, Allah heard my prayer." But I was filled with thankfulness and departed after the angel, leaving the soul sitting alone upon the red sand.

'Thus have I told thee my history, O Asrael. And now I pray thee to write my name in the book of the living that I

may fulfil the command of Allah and go my way to the city of Riad.'

Then Asrael again took up his pen to write in the book.

'Now thou art become a living man, though thou hast as yet no soul,' he said. 'And thou art subject to death by the sword and by sickness and by all those evils which spring up in the path of the living. And the day of thy death is already known to Allah who knows all things. But he is merciful and will doubtless grant thee a term of years in which to make thy trial. Nevertheless be swift in thy journey and speedy in all thou doest, for though mortal man may live for ever hereafter in glory, his years on earth are but as the breath which springs up in the desert towards evening and is gone before the stars appear.'

Khaled made a salutation before Asrael and went out of the third heaven, and passed through the second which is of burnished steel, and through the first in which the stars hang by golden chains, where Adam waits for the day of the resurrection, and at the gate he found the angel who had led him, and who now lifted him in his arms and bore him back to the Red Desert; for as he was now a mortal man he could no longer move through the air like the genii between the outer gate of heaven and the earth. Nor could he any longer see the soul of the Indian prince sitting upon the sand, though it was still there. But the angel was visible to him. So they stood together, and the angel spoke to him.

'Thou art now a mortal man,' he said, 'and subject to time as to death. To thee it seems but a moment since we went up together to the gate, and yet thou wast standing

ten months and thirteen days before Asrael, and of the body of the man whom thou slewest only the bones remain.'

So saying the angel blew upon the red sand and Khaled saw the white bones of the prince in the place where he had laid his body. So he was first made conscious of time.

'Nearly a year has passed, and though Allah be very merciful to thee, yet he will assuredly not suffer thee to live beyond the time of other men. Make haste therefore and depart upon thine errand. Yet because thou art come into the world a grown man, having neither father nor mother nor inheritance, I will give thee what is most necessary for thy journey.'

Then the angel took a handful of leaves from a ghada bush close by and gave them to Khaled, and as he gave them they were changed into a rich garment, and into linen, and into a shawl with which to make a turban, and shoes of red leather.

'Clothe thyself with these,' said the angel.

He broke a twig from the bush and placed it in Khaled's hand. Immediately it became a sabre of Damascus steel, in a sheath of leather with a belt.

'Take this sword, which is of such fine temper that it will cleave through an iron headpiece and a shirt of mail. But remember that it is not a sword made by magic. Let thy magic reside in thy arm, wield it for the faith, and put thy trust in Allah.'

Afterwards the angel took up a locust that was asleep on the sand waiting for the warmth of the morning sun. The angel held the locust up before Khaled, and then let it fall. But as it fell it became at once a beautiful bay mare with

round black eyes wide apart and an arching tail which swept down to the sand like a river of silk.

'Take this mare,' said the angel; 'she is of the pure breed of Nejed and as swift as the wind, but mortal like thyself.'

'But how shall I ride her without saddle or bridle?' asked Khaled.

'That is true,' answered the angel.

He laid leaves of the ghada upon the mare's back and they became a saddle, and placed a twig in her mouth and it turned into a bit and bridle.

Khaled thanked the angel and mounted.

'Farewell and prosper, and put thy trust in Allah, and forget not the day of judgment,' the angel said, and immediately returned to paradise.

So Khaled was left alone in the Red Desert, a living man obliged to shift for himself, liable to suffer hunger and thirst or to be slain by robbers, with no worldly possessions but his sword, his bay mare, and the clothes on his back. He knew moreover that he was more than two hundred miles from the city of Riad, and he knew that he could not accomplish this journey in less than four days. For when he was one of the genii he had often watched men toiling through desert on foot, and on camels and on horses, and had laughed with his companions at the slow progress they made. But now it was no laughing matter, for he had forgotten to ask the angel for dates and water, or even for a few handfuls of barley meal.

He turned the mare's head westward of the Goat, in which is the polar star, for he remembered that when he had carried away the Indian prince he had flown toward the

south-east, and as he began to gallop over the dark sand he laughed to himself.

'What poor things are men and their horses,' he said. 'To destroy me, this mare need only stumble and lame herself, and we shall both die of hunger and thirst in the desert.'

This reflection made him at first urge the mare to her greatest speed, for he thought that the sooner he should be out of the desert and among the villages beyond, the present danger would be passed. But presently he bethought him that the mare would be more likely to stumble and hurt herself in the dark if she were galloping than if she were moving at a moderate pace. He therefore drew bridle and patted her neck and made her walk slowly and cautiously forward.

But this did not please him either, after a time, for he remembered that if he rode too slowly he must die of hunger before reaching the end of his journey.

'Truly,' he said, 'one must learn what it is to be a man, in order to understand the uses of moderation. Gallop not lest thy horse fall and thou perish! Nor delay walking slowly by the road, lest thou die of thirst and hunger! Yet thou art not safe, for Al Walid died from treading upon an arrow, and Oda ibn Kais perished by perpetual sneezing. Allah is just and merciful! I will let the mare go at her own pace, for the end of all things is known.'

The mare, being left to herself, began to canter and carried Khaled onward all night without changing her gait.

'Nevertheless,' thought Khaled, 'if we are not soon out of the desert we shall suffer thirst during the day as well as hunger.'

When there was enough daylight to distinguish a black thread from a white, Khaled looked before him and saw that there was nothing but red sand in hillocks and ridges, with ghada bushes here and there. But still the mare cantered on and did not seem tired. Soon the sun rose and it grew very hot, for the air was quite still and it was summer time.

Khaled looked always before him and at last he saw a white patch in the distance and he knew that there must be water near it. For the water of the Red Desert whitens the sand. He therefore rode on cheerfully, for he was now thirsty, and the mare quickened her pace, for she also knew that she was near a drinking-place. But as they came close to the spot Khaled remembered that the preceding night had been Al Kadr, which falls between the seventh and eighth latter days of the month Ramadhan, during which the true believers neither eat nor drink so long as there is light enough to distinguish a white thread from a black one. So, when they reached the well, he let his mare drink her fill, and he took off the saddle and bridle and let her loose, after which he sat down with his head in the shade of a ghada bush to rest himself.

'Allah is merciful,' he said; 'the night will come, and then I will drink.' For he dared not ride farther, for fear of not finding water again.

Then again he was disturbed, for he had nothing to eat, and he thought that if he waited until night he would be hungry as well as thirsty. But presently he saw the mare trying to catch the locusts that flew about. She could only catch one or two, because it was now hot and they were able to fly quickly.

'When the night comes,' he said, 'the locusts will lie on the ground and cling to the bushes, being stiff with the cold, and then I will eat my fill, and drink also.'

Soon afterwards he fell asleep, being weary, and when he awoke it was night again and the stars were shining overhead. Khaled rose hastily and drank at the well and made ablutions and prayed, prostrating himself towards the Kebla. He remembered that he had slept a long time, and that he had not performed his devotions for a day and a night, so that he repeated them five times, to atone for the omission.

The mare was eating the locusts that now lay in great black patches on the sand unable to move and save themselves. Khaled threw his cloak over a great number of them and gathered them together. Then he kindled a fire of ghada by striking sparks from the blade of his sword, and when he had made a bed of coals he roasted the locusts after pulling off their legs, and ate his fill. While he was doing this he was much disturbed in mind.

'I have only just begun to live as a man,' he thought. 'Did I not stand ten months and thirteen days in the third heaven, unconscious of the passing of time? Who shall tell me whether I have not slept another ten months or more under this bush, like the companions of Al Rakim?'

So, when he had done eating and had drunk again from the well, and had made the mare drink, he saddled her quickly and mounted, and cantered on through the night, guiding his course by the stars. On the following day he again found a well, but much later than before, and he suffered much from thirst as he watched his mare dip her

black lips into the pool. Nevertheless he would not break his fast, for he was resolved to be a true believer in practice as well as in belief. So he fell asleep and awoke when it was night again, and ate and drank. In this way he journeyed several days until he began to see the hill country which borders the desert towards Riad, and he understood that he had been much farther away than he had imagined. But he reflected that Allah had doubtless intended to try his constancy by imposing upon him the journey through the desert during the days of fasting. But at last, he awoke one day just at sunset, instead of sleeping until the night. He had been travelling up the first slopes where the ground, though barren, is harder than in the desert, and had lain down in a hollow by an abundant spring. He rose now and made ablutions and prayed, as usual, towards Mecca; that is to say, being where he was, he turned his face to the west as the sun was setting. When he had finished he stood some minutes watching the red light over the desert below him, and then he was suddenly aware that the new moon was hanging just above the diminishing fire of the evening, and he knew that the fast of Ramadhan was over and that the feast of Bairam had begun. Thereat he was glad, and determined to take an unusual number of locusts for his evening meal.

But when he looked about he saw that there were no locusts in the place, though there was grass, which his mare was eating. Then he looked everywhere near the well to see whether some traveller had not perhaps dropped a few dates or a little barley by accident, but there was nothing.

'Doubtless,' he said, 'Allah wishes to show me that greediness is a sin even on the day of feasting.'

He drank as much of the water as he could in order to stay his hunger as well as assuage his thirst, and then he saddled the mare and rode up out of the hollow towards the hill country. Towards the middle of the night he came to a small village where all the people were celebrating the feast, having killed a young camel and several sheep. Seeing that he was a traveller they bade him be welcome, and he sat down among them and ate his fill of meat, praising Allah. And corn was given to his mare, so that the dumb animal also kept the feast.

'Truly,' said the people, 'thy mare is a daughter of Al Borak, the heavenly steed called "the Lightning," upon which the nocturnal journey was accomplished by the Prophet, upon whom be peace.'

They said this not because they divined that the mare had been given to Khaled by an angel, but because they saw by her beauty that she must be swift as the wind. For she had a large head, with bony cheeks, and a full forehead and round black eyes wide apart, with smooth black skin about them, and a pointed nose, and the under lip was like that of a camel, projecting a little. And she was neither too long nor too short, having straight legs like steel, and small feet and round hoofs, neither overgrown in idleness nor overworn with much work. And her tail lay flat and long and smooth when she was standing still but arched like the plume of an ostrich when she moved. Her coat was bright bay, glossy and smooth and without any white markings. By all these signs, which belong to the purest blood, the people

of the village knew that she was of the fleetest reared in Arabia. And Khaled was glad that the people admired her, since she was the chief of his few possessions, which indeed were not many.

He did not know beforehand what he should do, nor what he should say when in the presence of the Sultan of Nejed, still less how he could venture to ask Zehowah in marriage, having no gifts to offer and not being himself a prince. Before he had become a man it would have been easy for him to find treasures in the earth such as men had never seen, for, like all the genii, he had been acquainted with the most deeply hidden mines and with all places where men had hidden wealth in old times. But this knowledge does not belong to the intelligence becoming mortals, but rather to the faculty of seeing through solid substance which is exercised by the spirits of the air, and in his present state it was taken from him, together with all possibility of communicating with his former companions. He had nothing but his mare and his sword and the garments he wore, and though the mare was indeed a gift for a king he did not know whether he was meant to offer it to any one, seeing that it had been given him by an angel.

Nevertheless he did not lose heart, for the celestial messenger had told him that by the will of Allah he should marry Zehowah, and Allah was certainly able to give him a king's daughter in marriage without the aid of gifts, of gold, of musk, of 'Ood, of aloes or of pearls.

He rose, therefore, when he had eaten enough and had rested himself and his mare, and after thanking the people of the village for their entertainment he rode on his way. He

passed through a hill country, sometimes fertile and sometimes stony and deserted, but he found water by the way and such food as he needed; and accomplished the remainder of the journey without hindrance.

On the morning of the second day he came to a halting-place from which he could see the city of Riad, and he was astonished at the size and magnificence of the Sultan's palace, which was visible above the walls of the fortification. Yet he was aware that he had seen all this before as in a dream not altogether forgotten when a man wakes at dawn after a long and restless night.

He gazed awhile, after he had made his ablutions, and then calling to his mare to come to him, he mounted and rode through the southern gate into the heart of the city.

CHAPTER II

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When Khaled reached the palace he dismounted from his mare, and leading her by the bridle entered the gateway. Here he met many persons, guards, and slaves both black and white, and porters bearing provisions, and a few women, all hurrying hither and thither; and many noticed him, but a few gazed curiously into his face, and two or three grooms followed him a little way, pointing out to each other the beauties of his mare.

'Truly,' they said, 'if we did not know the mares of the stud better than the faces of our mothers, we should swear by Allah that this beast had been stolen from the Sultan's stables by a thief in the night, for she is of the best blood in Nejed.'

These being curious they saluted Khaled and asked him whence he came and whither he was going, seeing that it is not courteous to ask a stranger any other questions.

'I come from the Red Desert,' Khaled answered, 'and I am going into the palace as you see.'

The grooms saw that there was a rebuke in the last part of his answer and hung back and presently went their way.

'Are such mares bred in the Red Desert?' they exclaimed. 'The stranger is doubtless the sheikh of some powerful tribe. But if this be true, where are the men that came with him? And why is he dressed like a man of the city?'

So they hastened out of the gateway to find the Bedouins who, they supposed, must have accompanied Khaled on his journey.

But Khaled went forward and came to a great court in which were stone seats by the walls. Here a number of people were waiting. So he sat down upon one of the seats and his mare laid her nose upon his shoulder as though inquiring what he would do.

'Allah knows,' Khaled said, as though answering her. So he waited patiently.

At last a man came out into the courtyard who was richly dressed, and whom all the people saluted as he passed. But he came straight towards Khaled, who rose from his seat.

'Whence come you, my friend?' he inquired after they had exchanged the salutation.

'From the Red Desert, and I desire permission to speak with the Sultan when it shall please his majesty to see me.'

'And what do you desire of his majesty? I ask that I may inform him beforehand. So you will have a better reception.'

'Tell the Sultan,' said Khaled, 'that a man is here who has neither father nor mother nor any possessions beyond a swift mare, a keen sword and a strong hand, but who is come nevertheless to ask in marriage Zehowah, the Sultan's daughter.'

The minister smiled and gazed at Khaled in silence for a moment, but when he had looked keenly at his face, he became grave.

'It may be,' he thought, 'that this is some great prince who comes thus simply as in a disguise, and it were best not to anger him.'

'I will deliver your message,' he answered aloud, 'though it is a strange one. It is customary for those who come to

ask for a maiden in marriage to bring gifts—and to receive others in return,' he added.

'I neither bring gifts nor ask any,' said Khaled. 'Allah is great and will provide me with what I need.'

'I fear that he will not provide you with the Sultan's daughter for a wife,' said the minister as he went away, but Khaled did not hear the words, though he would have cared little if he had.

Now it chanced that Zehowah was sitting in a balcony surrounded with lattice, over the courtyard, on that morning and she had seen Khaled enter, leading his mare by the bridle. But though she watched the stranger and his beast idly for some time she thought as little of the one as of the other, for her heart was not turned to love, and she knew nothing of horses. But her women thought differently and spoke loudly, praising the beauty of both.

'There is indeed a warrior able to fight in the front of our armies,' they said. 'Truly such a man must have been Khaled ibn Walad, the Sword of the Lord, in the days of the Prophet—upon whom peace.'

By and by there was a cry that the Sultan was coming into the room, and the women rose and retired. The Sultan sat down upon the carpet by his daughter, in the balcony.

'Do you see that stranger, holding a beautiful mare by the bridle?' he asked.

'Yes, I see him,' answered Zehowah indifferently.

'He is come to ask you in marriage.'

'Another!' she exclaimed with a careless laugh. 'If it is the will of Allah I will marry him. If not, he will go away like the rest.'

'This man is not like the rest, my daughter. He is either a madman or some powerful prince in disguise.'

'Or both, perhaps,' laughed Zehowah. She laughed often, for although she was not inclined to love, she was of a gentle and merry temper.

'His message was a strange one,' said the Sultan. 'He says that he neither brings gifts nor asks them, that he has neither father nor mother, nor any possessions excepting a swift mare, a keen sword and a strong hand.'

'I see the mare, the sword and the hand,' answered Zehowah. 'But the hand is like any other hand—how can I tell whether it be strong? The sword is in its sheath, and I cannot see its edge, and though the mare is pretty enough, I have seen many of your own I liked as well. The elephants of the Indian prince were more amusing, and the prince himself was more beautiful than this stranger with his black beard and his solemn face.'

'That is true,' said the Sultan with a sigh.

'Do you wish me to marry this man?' Zehowah asked.

'My daughter, I wish you to choose of your own free will. Nevertheless I trust that you will choose before long, that I may see my child's children before I die.'

For the Sultan was old and white-bearded, and was already somewhat bowed with advancing years and with burden of many cares and the fatigues of many wars. Yet his eye was bright and his heart fearless still, though his judgment was often weak and vacillating.

'Do you wish me to marry this man?' Zehowah asked again. 'He will be a strange husband, for he is a strange suitor, coming without gifts and having neither father nor