

KHALED, A TALE OF ARABIA

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Khaled, a tale of Arabia by F. Marion Crawford

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F. MARION CRAWFORD

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By F. MARION CRAWFORD

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CHAPTER I

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 re-

nounce 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 naked-