

"THE THIEF OF BAGDAD"

BY AHMED ABDULLAH

Based on Douglas Fairbanks' Fantasy of the Arabian Nights, by Elton Thomas

"Help yourself to it. I am not keeping you from getting it, am I?"

"Well—but where is it?"

The Old Man of the Midnight Sea pointed at the black, coiling, swirling waters. "Down there!" he said.

Ahmed leaned over the side of the boat and looked.

"I cannot see a thing," he replied.

"Naturally not. The box is a hundred fathoms deep—at the very bottom of the lake."

"Then—how can I get it?"

"You will have to dive for it. You will have to jump into the Sea of Resignation to Fate."

Ahmed gave a little involuntary shudder; and the Old Man of the Midnight Sea took compassion on him.

"Thief of Bagdad," he said, "be not afraid. Everything, sooner or later, must go down into the waters of this lake. All men and women and children—even the unborn children. The moon goes down there every morning when it is waning, and the sun every night when it has set on earth. At the bottom of the lake you will find a cave—a cave made of the shimmering, opal tears of man's grief, with windows made of the milk-white crystals and brightgreen emeralds of man's laughter, and a gleaming red door, like an immense ruby, made of the heart's blood of all those who have loved and who have suffered and sacrificed greatly for the sake of their love. If your own love for Zobeid be great enough, your resignation to God's will sincere enough, you will find this door. You will open it. And, beyond the threshold, you will see the magic silver box."

"What does the box contain?" demanded Ahmed.

"A very precious treasure. The most precious treasure in the world. Some men call it happiness. But emperors, fools, and wise men call it honor. It is the same thing. By the way, he added as Ahmed stood up, about to dive into the lake—"the magic box is wrapped in the Cloak of Invisibility. If I were you I would bring the cloak along too. It will come in handy in your future adventures."

"How do you know?" asked Ahmed.

"Naturally I know, O fool!" chuckled the old man. "Did I not tell you that I am Kismet itself?"

"I beg your pardon," Ahmed murmured, crestfallen but polite; and, the next second, he curved into the water in an audacious leap.

A splash—circles widening, breaking dissolving—smoothness and indifference again—where the waters closed over him—and down there, as he bored his way head foremost through the hundred fathoms, a myriad flecks of glittering gold.

He found the cave without much trouble. It shone like an immense jewel, opal and milkwhite and emerald-green and ruby-red. He walked up to the door that was made of the heart's blood of lovers who had suffered and sacrificed greatly because of their love; and his own love was like a sharp scimitar to the clutch of his hand, his resignation to the sendings of Fate growing, steadily growing, was like a stout buffalo-hide shield to his elbow.

He laughed fearlessly, carelessly, when from rocks and clumps of coral at the bottom of the lake rose slimy, huge octopi that writhed about him with countless, sucking, pulpy tentacles. The sword of his love cut their bloated bodies to pieces. The shield of his resignation guarded him against their attack. The strength of his love opened for him the blood-red door. The vision of his resignation pierced for him the cloak of invisibility in which the silver box was wrapped.

He stuffed the cloak—it was as light as thistle-down—into his waist shawl—and picked up the magic box. It was small and square. It did not look much like anything precious; just a plain silver box, oxidized by the water, and neither carved nor ornamented.

He rose again through the hundred fathoms, swimming upward steadily, with a full, keen stroke of his powerful shoulders, until he reached the surface of the lake.

He looked about him.

The Old Man of the Midnight Sea had disappeared. So had the boat. It was day. The sun shimmered down with a thousand splintering, golden lances; and, as he swam ashore, he saw there a splendid, snow-white horse a horse with two immense silver wings, that pawed the ground impatiently with dainty feet and neighed when it saw Ahmed.

Ahmed thought and acted at the same fraction of a second. He jumped on the horse's back.

"Off with you!" he cried. "Carry me West—across the Enchanted Garden, the Valley of the Monsters, the Hill of Eternal Fire, and the Valley of the Seven Temptations!"

And the horse spread its silver wings and rose through the air—and we may mention here that the Arab chronicler from which this tale is taken refers to this horse as "the Winged Horse of Imagination."

"For," says this chronicler, "what is love if not imagination? Do we not always imagine the loved one's body and soul to be the most beautiful on earth? Such, doubtless, were Ahmed's thoughts about Zobeid. Nor was he the only one. By the teeth of the Prophet—on Him the salute—I myself, the scribe of this tale, met in Samarkand a woman, seventy years old, stupid, and who looked exactly like a well-fed pig. Yet I met a man in Samarkand who swore upon the Koran that this woman was so beautiful that she caused the moon to blush with envy and jealousy. Love is indeed as blind as a puppy-dog!"

But, if love is as blind as a puppy-dog, how blind then is conceit? Conceit of three Princes of Asia, meeting at the little oasis of Terek el-Bey, not far from Bagdad!

Of the three, the Persian's conceit was the most childish. He waddled about the oasis—as the Mongol Prince whispered to a confidential Manchuk clerk of his retinue—"looking for all the world exactly like a cross-breed between a hog and a peahen, having inherited the former's bloated, exaggerated, excessive, indecent paunch and the latter's superb, quaint, vanity."

(To Be Continued.)

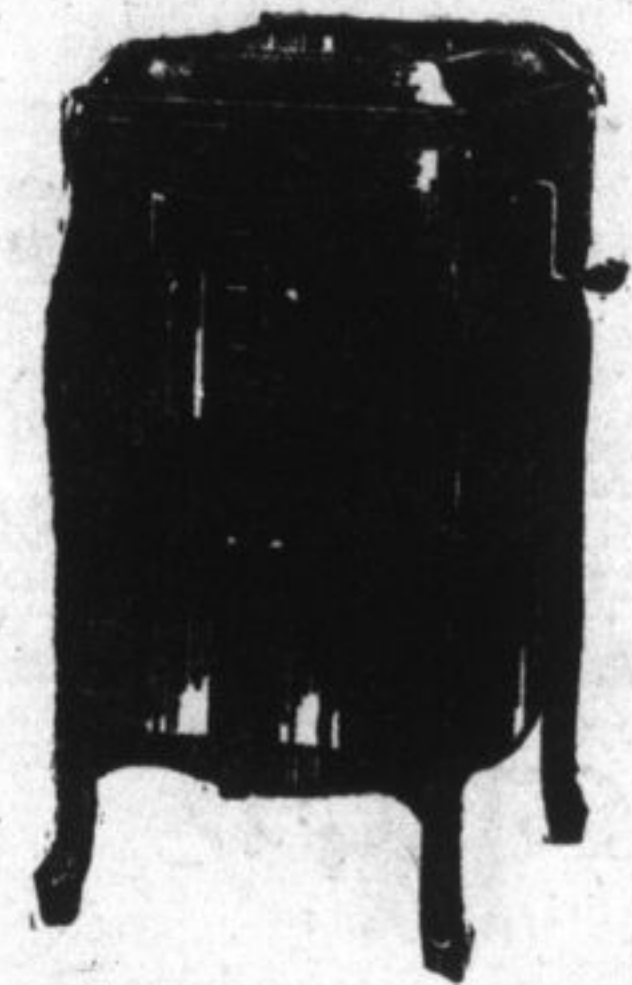
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AS MARY SAW HIM

A CHRISTMAS FANCY

The optional International Sunday School Lesson for December 21st is a Christmas Lesson, "God's Gift to the World."—John 1:14-18; 3:16-21. By WILLIAM T. ELLIS

(What Mary May Have Said to John, at Twilight Shortly After the Ascension.)

When I go forth from your home—our home—the women who have heard the Story look pityingly at me; and even of our own Company some seem sorry for me; while others, seeing Him in me, treat me as if I were other than myself. Yes, I have heard them whispering about the sword that should pierce my heart.

I want to tell them—perhaps you can find the right words, for you were ever able to understand the deep things—that my sorrow is not so great as my joy. Is it wrong, my

son—would He care, think you?—that I in turn look in pity upon the women who have never known the pain of bearing or the anguish of burying a son? All—all—that I have suffered is small price for the joy I have known. There is not a childless queen on any throne who is not to be pitied, by even the lowliest mother.

In these days of memory I live over those first months at Nazareth, and the journey to Bethlehem, and the wonder-night at the khan; and the swift escape to Egypt. The women of Nazareth had been cruel to me, and their whispers and looks, whenever I went to the fountain with my water jar, cut deeper than Roman lashes.

The Mystery seemed too great for me to bear or believe. Elizabeth comforted me beyond words; and God gave her, too, a Great One for a son. Then Joseph was so kind, in his strong quiet way, sheltering me more like a father than a lover. He, too, had had a Message; and though sometimes people called him slow of understanding, he was quick to answer every call of duty.

The coming of a first-born is always a mystery to a woman; but to me, knowing what I knew, the strangeness and awe of it were well nigh crushing.

As we went south to our family home for the high-handed Roman census, the spirit of Joseph was shaken because the public khan at Bethlehem was crowded; for he always treated me as though the best were my right; and he had set his heart on a large upper room. How tender and comforting he was on those trying last five miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. As for me, I was well content when the golden-hearted horse-grooms made place for me by a manger, on the fresh, sweet straw, with the friendly warmth of the beasts about me. Somehow, I felt as if it were fitting that my Son should be born amid these strong men and simple surroundings. I thought of it many times later when

He called Himself the "Son of man." You have heard from the very lips of those old shepherds whom we met at the Feast, concerning the glory that shined upon them and their sheep and the hillside. Far greater, though, was the radiance that filled my own heart when the innkeeper's wife laid the Babe on my breast.

To the shepherds He was the Comforter, the Child of prophecy and sign—and no sign so great as that which had been given to me alone—but to me, He was my Son. In those baby days He was mine—all mine; and His world was my arms.

Perhaps it was unspiritual pride, but even when we had to make swift flight from Herod's sword—and what a man Joseph was in that hour!—I thrilled with the thought that this my Son was such a one as made even kings on their thrones tremble in fear and jealousy.

Then, at His first Passover, when we found Him the centre of the learned rabble, who thought Him and His questions wonderful, the refrain that sang itself in my heart was, "This is my Son." True, I rebuked the Boy, as was fitting (Joseph never laid word of admonition on Him, leaving that to me), but even as I spoke and He answered, I glorified, that He who so early was about the things of the Father, was my Son.

When the crowds followed Him through Galilee, and when the people acclaimed Him as He entered Jerusalem, my spirit kept saying within me, "To them He is some Great One; but to me He is my Son."

I knew a greater thing about Him than they all; it was oftener in my mind than the wonder of His birth; for day by day, in our lowly home, I saw revealed the beauty of His soul. Never before was there lived such a life of graciousness and devotion. All the tender love, all the gentle courtesies, which maidens dream they may receive from the man who is their hero, were daily bestowed upon me by my Son. Little do men imagine the glory of goodness which was revealed to our Nazareth home alone. The whole world is talking of the deeds of mercy and helpfulness that He did throughout those three busy years when He walked publicly amidst the multitudes; yet I can match every one of these marvelous ministries with an instance of sweet and beautiful service in our home circle.

Never was there such a son of brother. How blessed was I above women!

That gentle heart which loved the whole world, loved me most of all. He thought of me in that last hour, when He gave me into your keeping; that was because He had been thoughtful of me ever since, as a little toddler about my feet in Nazareth. He had done the first considerable offices of love. A wonderful gentleman was my Son.

Now I must tell you a thing that I have never said before, but you will understand. In that awful hour on the Cross, when His broken heart cried aloud with a cry that seemed to break my heart, too; when the sympathetic darknesses wrapped us in; and the very rocks themselves on which we stood swayed in agony, I seemed to hear Him crying as my Baby cried, long ago. Even in that hour of anguish, I hope it is not impious—He who hung there before us in bitter shame, all for a world's pardon, was to me a Babe once more in my arms; and my heart ached to comfort Him with tender, soothing, crooning words.

While I was bowed in tears beside the Cross, there passed before my mind all His beautiful babyhood. I looked upon those bleeding hands nailed to the wood, but what I saw was His baby hands, so small, so soft, so graceful; and the face, as delicate as a flower's petal, with golden curls where now the cruel thorns flowered red. A thousand incidents of His childhood came back to me; and while the others heard Him cry in anguish, "Father!" I seemed to hear Him call "Mother!" as he used to do in all His little joys and sorrows.

Yes, I know He is on His throne; and I shall become used to that glory some day; for even the mother of the Son of God cannot be denied pride in every triumph of her Child; but he is more real to me as my wee, sleeping Baby cuddling in my arms, with His lips at my breast, and His soft hand on my cheek.

Surely, there is comfort for all the mothers that may live in the power of the new life of my Son, that He once was to one woman only a baby, like their own. As He was tender to me above all others on earth, so I think His sympathy is stronger for all the mothers in the world.

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