

THE STORY OF THE FAIR CIRCASSIANS

‘WE were born in Circassia of poor people, and my sister’s name is Tezila and mine Dely. Having nothing but our beauty to help us in life, we were carefully trained in all the accomplishments that give pleasure. We were both quick to learn, and from our childhood could play all sorts of instruments, could sing, and above all could dance. We were besides, lively and merry, as in spite of our misfortunes we are to this day.

‘We were easily pleased and quite content with our lives at home, when one morning the officials who had been sent to find wives for the Sultan saw us, and were struck with our beauty. We had always expected something of the sort, and were resigned to our lot, when we chanced to see two young men enter our house. The elder, who was about twenty years of age, had black hair and very bright eyes. The other could not have been more than fifteen, and was so fair that he might easily have passed for a girl.

‘They knocked at the door with a timid air and begged our parents to give them shelter, as they had lost their way. After some hesitation their request was granted, and they were invited into the room in which we were. And if our parents’ hearts were touched by their beauty, our own were not any harder, so that our departure for the palace, which had been arranged for the next day, suddenly became intolerable to us.

‘Night came, and I awoke from my sleep to find the

younger of the two strangers sitting at my bedside and felt him take my hand.

“Fear nothing, lovely Dely,” he whispered, “from one who never knew love till he saw you. My name,” he went on, “is Prince Delicate, and I am the son of the king of the Isle of Black Marble. My friend, who travels with me, is one of the richest nobles of my country, and the secrets which he knows are the envy of the Sultan himself. And we left our native country because my father wished me to marry a lady of great beauty, but with one eye a trifle smaller than the other.”

‘My vanity was flattered at so speedy a conquest, and I was charmed with the way the young man had declared his passion. I turned my eyes slowly on him, and the look I gave him caused him almost to lose his senses. He fell fainting forward, and I was unable to move till Tezila, who had hastily put on a dress, ran to my assistance together with Thelamis, the young noble of whom the Prince had spoken.

‘As soon as we were all ourselves again we began to bewail our fate, and the journey that we were to take that very day to Constantinople. But we felt a little comforted when Thelamis assured us that he and the prince would follow in our steps, and would somehow contrive to speak to us. Then they kissed our hands, and left the house by a side-way.

‘A few moments later our parents came to tell us that the escort had arrived, and having taken farewell of them we mounted the camels, and took our seats in a kind of box that was fixed to the side of the animal. These boxes were large enough for us to sleep in comfortably, and as there was a window in the upper part, we were able to see the country through which we passed.

‘For several days we journeyed on, feeling sad and anxious as to what might become of us, when one day as I was looking out of the window of our room, I heard my name called, and beheld a beautifully dressed girl jumping

out of the box on the other side of our camel. One glance told me that it was the prince, and my heart bounded with joy. It was, he said, Thelamis's idea to disguise him like this, and that he himself had assumed the character of a slave-dealer who was taking this peerless maiden as a present to the Sultan. Thelamis had also persuaded the officer in charge of the caravan to let him hire the vacant box, so it was easy for the prince to scramble out of his own window and approach ours.

This ingenious trick enchanted us, but our agreeable conversation was soon interrupted by the attendants, who perceived that the camel was walking in a crooked manner and came to find out what was wrong. Luckily they were slow in their movements, and the prince had just time to get back to his own box and restore the balance, before the trick was discovered.

'But neither the prince nor his friend had any intention of allowing us to enter the Sultan's palace, though it was difficult to know how we were to escape, and what was to become of us when once we *had* escaped. At length, one day as we were drawing near Constantinople, we learned from the prince that Thelamis had made acquaintance with a holy dervish whom he had met on the road, and had informed him that we were his sisters, who were being sold as slaves against his will. The good man was interested in the story, and readily agreed to find us shelter if we could manage to elude the watchfulness of our guards. The risk was great, but it was our only chance.

'That night, when the whole caravan was fast asleep, we raised the upper part of our boxes and by the help of Thelamis climbed silently out. We next went back some distance along the way we had come, then, striking into another road, reached at last the retreat prepared for us by the dervish. Here we found food and rest, and I need not say what happiness it was to be free once more.

‘The dervish soon became a slave to our beauty, and the day after our escape he proposed that we should allow him to conduct us to an inn situated at a short distance, where we should find two Jews, owners of precious talismans which did not really belong to them. “Try,” said the dervish, “by some means to get possession of them.”

‘The inn, though not on the direct road to Constantinople, was a favourite one with merchants, owing to the excellence of the food, and on our arrival we discovered at least six or eight other people who had stopped for refreshment. They greeted us politely, and we sat down to table together.

‘In a short time the two men described by the dervish entered the room, and at a sign from him my sister made room at her side for one, while I did the same for the other.

‘Now the dervish had happened to mention that “their brother had danced.” At the moment we paid no attention to this remark, but it came back to our minds now, and we determined that they should dance also. To accomplish this we used all our arts and very soon bent them to our wills, so that they could refuse us nothing. At the end of the day we remained possessors of the talismans and had left them to their fate, while the prince and Thelamis fell more in love with us than ever, and declared that we were more lovely than any women in the world.

‘The sun had set before we quitted the inn, and we had made no plans as to where we should go next, so we readily consented to the prince’s proposal that we should embark without delay for the Isle of Black Marble. What a place it was! Rocks blacker than jet towered above its shores and shed thick darkness over the country. Our sailors had not been there before and were nearly as frightened as ourselves, but thanks to Thelamis, who undertook to be our pilot, we landed safely on the beach.

‘When we had left the coast behind us, with its walls of jet, we entered a lovely country where the fields were greener, the streams clearer, and the sun brighter than anywhere else. The people crowded round to welcome their prince, whom they loved dearly, but they told him that the king was still full of rage at his son’s refusal to marry his cousin the Princess Okimpare, and also at his flight. Indeed, they all begged him not to visit the capital, as his life would hardly be safe. So, much as I should have enjoyed seeing the home of my beloved prince, I implored him to listen to this wise advice and to let us all go to Thelamis’s palace in the middle of a vast forest.

‘To my sister and myself, who had been brought up in a cottage, this house of Thelamis’s seemed like fairyland. It was built of pink marble, so highly polished that the flowers and streams surrounding it were reflected as in a mirror. One set of rooms was furnished especially for me in yellow silk and silver, to suit my black hair. Fresh dresses were provided for us every day, and we had slaves to wait on us. Ah, why could not this happiness have lasted for ever!

‘The peace of our lives was troubled by Thelamis’s jealousy of my sister, as he could not endure to see her on friendly terms with the prince, though knowing full well that his heart was mine. Every day we had scenes of tender reproaches and of explanations, but Tezila’s tears never failed to bring Thelamis to his knees, with prayers for forgiveness.

‘We had been living in this way for some months when one day the news came that the king had fallen dangerously ill. I begged the prince to hurry at once to the Court, both to see his father and also to show himself to the senators and nobles, but as his love for me was greater than his desire of a crown, he hesitated as if foreseeing all that afterwards happened. At last Tezila spoke to him so seriously in Thelamis’s presence, that he determined to go, but promised that he would return before night.

'Night came but no prince, and Tezila, who had been the cause of his departure, showed such signs of uneasiness that Thelamis's jealousy was at once awakened. As for me, I cannot tell what I suffered. Not being able to sleep I rose from my bed and wandered into the forest, along the road which he had taken so many hours before. Suddenly I heard in the distance the sound of a horse's hoofs, and in a few moments the prince had flung himself down and was by my side. "Ah, how I adore you!" he exclaimed; "Thelamis's love will never equal mine." The words were hardly out of his mouth when I heard a slight noise behind, and before we could turn round both our heads were rolling in front of us, while the voice of Thelamis cried:

"Perjured wretches, answer me; and you, faithless Tezila, tell me why you have betrayed me like this?"

'Then I understood what had happened, and that, in his rage, he had mistaken me for my sister.

"Alas," replied my head in weak tones, "I am not Tezila, but Dely, whose life you have destroyed, as well as that of your friend." At this Thelamis paused and seemed to reflect for an instant.

"Be not frightened," he said more quietly, "I can make you whole again," and laying a magic powder on our tongues he placed our heads on our necks. In the twinkling of an eye our heads were joined to our bodies without leaving so much as a scar; only that, blinded with rage as he still was, Thelamis had placed my head on the prince's body, and his on mine!

'I cannot describe to you how odd we both felt at this strange transformation. We both instinctively put up our hands—he to feel his hair, which was, of course, dressed like a woman's, and I to raise the turban which pressed heavily on my forehead. But we did not know what had happened to us, for the night was still dark.

'At this point Tezila appeared, followed by a troop of slaves bearing flowers. It was only by the light of their



THE WRONG HEADS
ON THE WRONG BODIES

torches that we understood what had occurred. Indeed the first thought of both of us was that we must have changed clothes.

‘Now in spite of what we may say, we all prefer our own bodies to those of anybody else, so notwithstanding our love for each other, at first we could not help feeling a little cross with Thelamis. However, so deep was the prince’s passion for me, that very soon he began to congratulate himself on the change. “My happiness is perfect,” he said; “my heart, beautiful Dely, has always been yours, and now I have your head also.”

‘But though the prince made the best of it, Thelamis was much ashamed of his stupidity. “I have,” he said hesitatingly, “two other pastilles which have the same magic properties as those I used before. Let me cut off your heads again, and that will put matters straight.” The proposal sounded tempting, but was a little risky, and after consulting together we decided to let things remain as they were. “Do not blame me then,” continued Thelamis, “if you will not accept my offer. But take the two pastilles, and if it ever happens that you are decapitated a second time, make use of them in the way I have shown you, and each will get back his own head.” So saying he presented us with the pastilles, and we all returned to the castle.

‘However, the troubles caused by the unfortunate exchange were only just beginning. My head, without thinking what it was doing, led the prince’s body to my apartments. But my women, only looking at the dress, declared I had mistaken the corridor, and called some slaves to conduct me to his highness’s rooms. This was bad enough, but when—as it was still night—my servants began to undress me, I nearly fainted from surprise and confusion, and no doubt the prince’s head was suffering in the same manner at the other end of the castle!

‘By the next morning—you will easily guess that we

slept but little—we had grown partly accustomed to our strange situation, and when we looked in the mirror, the prince had become brown-skinned and black-haired, while my head was covered with his curly golden locks. And after that first day, everyone in the palace had become so accustomed to the change that they thought no more about it.

‘Some weeks after this, we heard that the king of the Isle of Black Marble was dead. The prince’s head, which once was mine, was full of ambitious desires, and he longed to ride straight to the capital and proclaim himself king. But then came the question as to whether the nobles would recognise the prince with a girl’s body, and indeed, when we came to think of it, which was prince and which was girl?

‘At last, after much argument, my head carried the day and we set out; but only to find that the king had declared the Princess Okimpare his successor. The greater part of the senators and nobles openly professed that they would much have preferred the rightful heir, but as they could not recognise him either in the prince or me, they chose to consider us as impostors and threw us into prison.

‘A few days later Tezila and Thelamis, who had followed us to the capital, came to tell us that the new queen had accused us of high treason, and had herself been present at our trial—which was conducted without us. They had been in mortal terror as to what would be our sentence, but by a piece of extraordinary luck we had been condemned to be beheaded.

‘I told my sister that I did not see exactly where the luck came in, but Thelamis interrupted me rudely:

“What!” he cried, “of course I shall make use of the pastilles, and——” but here the officers arrived to lead us to the great square where the execution was to take place—for Okimpare was determined there should be no delay.

‘The square was crowded with people of all ages and all ranks, and in the middle a platform had been erected on which was the scaffold, with the executioner, in a black mask, standing by. At a sign from him I mounted first, and in a moment my head was rolling at his feet. With a bound my sister and Thelamis were beside me, and like lightning Thelamis seized the sabre from the headsmen, and cut off the head of the prince. And before the multitude had recovered from their astonishment at these strange proceedings, our bodies were joined to our right heads, and the pastilles placed on our tongues. Then Thelamis led the prince to the edge of the platform and presented him to the people, saying, “Behold your lawful king.”

‘Shouts of joy rent the air at the sound of Thelamis’s words, and the noise reached Okimpare in the palace. Smitten with despair at the news, she fell down unconscious on her balcony, and was lifted up by the slaves and taken back to her own house.

‘Meanwhile our happiness was all turned to sorrow. I had rushed up to the prince to embrace him fondly, when he suddenly grew pale and staggered.

“I die faithful to you,” he murmured, turning his eyes towards me, “and I die a king!” and leaning his head on my shoulder he expired quietly, for one of the arteries in his neck had been cut through.

‘Not knowing what I did I staggered towards the sabre which was lying near me, with the intention of following my beloved prince as speedily as possible. And when Thelamis seized my hand (but only just in time), in my madness I turned the sabre upon him, and he fell struck through the heart at my feet.’

The whole company were listening to the story with breathless attention, when it became plain that Dely could go no further, while Tezila had flung herself on a heap of cushions and hidden her face. Zambac ordered

her women to give them all the attention possible, and desired they should be carried into her own rooms.

When the two sisters were in this condition, Ibrahim, who was a very prudent young man, suggested to his parents that, as the two Circassians were both unconscious, it would be an excellent opportunity to search them and see if the talismans belonging to the daughters of Siroco were concealed about their persons. But the Bassa, shocked at the notion of treating his guests in so inhospitable a manner, refused to do anything of the kind, adding that the next day he hoped to persuade them to give the talismans up of their own free will.

By this time it was nearly midnight and Neangir, who was standing near the Jewess Sumi, drew out the portrait of Argentine, and heard with delight that she was even more beautiful than her picture. Everyone was waiting on tip-toe for the appearance of the two watches, who were expected when the clock struck twelve to come in search of Sumi, and that there might be no delay the Bassa ordered all the doors to be flung wide open. It was done, and there entered not the longed-for watches, but the page who had been sent away in disgrace.

Then the Bassa arose in wrath. 'Azemi,' he said, 'did I not order you to stand no more in my presence?'

'My lord,' replied Azemi, modestly, 'I was hidden outside the door, listening to the tale of the two Circassians. And as I know you are fond of stories, give me also leave to tell you one. I promise you it shall not be long.'

'Speak on,' replied the Bassa, 'but take heed what you say.'

'My lord,' began Azemi, 'this morning I was walking in the town when I noticed a man going in the same direction followed by a slave. He entered a baker's shop, where he bought some bread which he gave to the slave to carry. I watched him and saw that he purchased many other kinds of provisions at other places, and when

the slave could carry no more his master commanded him to return home and have supper ready at midnight.

'When left alone the man went up the street, and turning into a jeweller's shop, brought out a watch that as far as I could see was made of silver. He walked on a few steps, then stooped and picked up a gold watch which lay at his feet. At this point I ran up and told him that if he did not give me half its price I would report him to the Cadi; he agreed, and conducting me to his house produced four hundred sequins, which he said was my share, and having got what I wanted I went away.

'As it was the hour for attending on my lord I returned home and accompanied you to the Cadi, where I heard the story of the three Jews and learned the importance of the two watches I had left at the stranger's. I hastened to his house, but he had gone out, and I could only find the slave, whom I told that I was the bearer of important news for his master. Believing me to be one of his friends, he begged me to wait, and showed me into a room where I saw the two watches lying on the table. I put them in my pocket, leaving the four hundred sequins in place of the gold watch and three gold pieces which I knew to be the price of the other. As you know the watches never remain with the person who buys them, this man may think himself very lucky to get back his money. I have wound them both up, and at this instant Aurora and Argentine are locked safely into my own room.'

Everybody was so delighted to hear this news that Azemi was nearly stifled with their embraces, and Neangir could hardly be prevented from running to break in the door, though he did not even know where the page slept.

But the page begged to have the honour of fetching the ladies himself, and soon returned leading them by the hand.

For some minutes all was a happy confusion, and Ibrahim took advantage of it to fall on his knees before Aurora, and search in the fifth fold of her dress for the missing coral bead. The Book of Spells had told the truth; there it was, and as the chaplet was now complete the young man's days of seeking were over.

In the midst of the general rejoicing Hassan alone bore a gloomy face.

'Alas!' he said, 'everyone is happy but the miserable being you see before you. I have lost the only consolation in my grief, which was to feel that I had a brother in misfortune!'

'Be comforted,' replied the Bassa; 'sooner or later the dervish who stole the pink bag is sure to be found.'

Supper was then served, and after they had all eaten of rare fruits which seemed to them the most delicious in the whole world, the Bassa ordered the flask containing the elixir of love to be brought and the young people to drink of it. Then their eyes shone with a new fire, and they swore to be true to each other till death.

This ceremony was scarcely over when the clock struck one, and in an instant Aurora and Argentine had vanished, and in the place where they stood lay two watches. Silence fell upon all the company—they had forgotten the enchantment; then the voice of Azemi was heard asking if he might be allowed to take charge of the watches till the next day, pledging his head to end their enchantment. With the consent of Sumi, this was granted, and the Bassa gave Azemi a purse containing a thousand sequins, as a reward for the services he had already rendered to them. After this everybody went to his own apartment.

Azemi had never possessed so much money before, and never closed his eyes for joy the whole night long. Very early he got up and went into the garden, thinking how he could break the enchantment of the daughters of Siroco. Suddenly the soft tones of a woman fell on his



The Dervish drowning the Pigs

ear, and peeping through the bushes he saw Tezila, who was arranging flowers in her sister's hair. The rustling of the leaves caused Dely to start; she jumped up as if to fly, but Azemi implored her to remain and begged her to tell him what happened to them after the death of their lovers, and how they had come to find the dervish.

'The punishment decreed to us by the Queen Okimpare,' answered Dely, 'was that we were to dance and sing in the midst of our sorrow, at a great fête which was to be held that very day for all her people. This cruel command nearly turned our brains, and we swore a solemn oath to make all lovers as wretched as we were ourselves. In this design we succeeded so well that in a short time the ladies of the capital came in a body to Okimpare, and prayed her to banish us from the kingdom, before their lives were made miserable for ever. She consented, and commanded us to be placed on board a ship, with our slave Gouloucou.

'On the shore we saw an old man who was busily engaged in drowning some little black pigs, talking to them all the while, as if they could understand him.

"Accursed race," said he, "it is you who have caused all the misfortunes of him to whom I gave the magic bracelet. Perish all of you!"

'We drew near from curiosity, and recognised in him the dervish who had sheltered us on our first escape from the caravan.

'When the old man discovered who we were he was beside himself with pleasure, and offered us a refuge in the cave where he lived. We gladly accepted his offer, and to the cave we all went, taking with us the last little pig, which he gave us as a present.

"The Bassa of the Sea," he added, "will pay you anything you like to ask for it."

'Without asking why it was so precious I took the pig and placed it in my work bag, where it has been ever since. Only yesterday we offered it to the Bassa, who

laughed at us, and this so enraged us against the dervish that we cut off his beard when he was asleep, and now he dare not show himself.'

'Ah,' exclaimed the page, 'it is not fitting that such beauty should waste itself in making other people miserable. Forget the unhappy past and think only of the future. And accept, I pray you, this watch, to mark the brighter hours in store.' So saying he laid the watch upon her knee. Then he turned to Tezila. 'And you fair maiden, permit me to offer you this other watch. True it is only of silver, but it is all I have left to give. And I feel quite sure that you must have somewhere a silver seal, that will be exactly the thing to go with it.'

'Why, so you have,' cried Dely; 'fasten your silver seal to your watch, and I will hang my gold one on to mine.'

The seals were produced, and, as Azemi had guessed, they were the talismans which the two Circassians had taken from Izif and Izouf, mounted in gold and silver. As quick as lightning the watches slid from the hands of Tezila and her sister, and Aurora and Argentine stood before them, each with her talisman on her finger.

At first they seemed rather confused themselves at the change which had taken place, and the sunlight which they had not seen for so long, but when gradually they understood that their enchantment had come to an end, they could find no words to express their happiness.

The Circassians could with difficulty be comforted for the loss of the talismans, but Aurora and Argentine entreated them to dry their tears, as their father, Siroco, who was governor of Alexandria, would not fail to reward them in any manner they wished. This promise was soon confirmed by Siroco himself, who came into the garden with the Bassa and his two sons, and was speedily joined by the ladies of the family. Only Hassan was absent. It was the hour in which he was condemned to bewail his ebony hand.

To the surprise of all a noise was at this moment heard in a corner of the terrace, and Hassan himself appeared surrounded by slaves, clapping his hands and shouting with joy. 'I was weeping as usual,' cried he, 'when all at once the tears refused to come to my eyes, and on looking down at my hand I saw that its blackness had vanished. And now, lovely Zelida, nothing prevents me any longer from offering you the hand, when the heart has been yours always.'

But though Hassan never thought of asking or caring what had caused his cure, the others were by no means so indifferent. It was quite clear that the little black pig must be dead—but how, and when? To this the slaves answered that they had seen that morning a man pursued by three others, and that he had taken refuge in the cavern which they had been left to guard. Then, in obedience to orders, they had rolled a stone over the entrance.

Piercing shrieks interrupted their story, and a man, whom the Circassians saw to be the old dervish, rushed round the corner of the terrace with the three Jews behind him. When the fugitive beheld so many people collected together, he turned down another path, but the slaves captured all four and brought them before their master.

What was the surprise of the Bassa when he beheld in the old dervish the man who had given the chaplet, the copper plaque, and the bracelet to his three sons. 'Fear nothing, holy father,' he said, 'you are safe with me. But tell us, how came you here?'

'My lord,' explained the dervish, 'when my beard was cut off during my sleep by the two Circassians, I was ashamed to appear before the eyes of men, and fled, bearing with me the pink silk bag. In the night these three men fell in with me, and we passed some time in conversation, but at dawn, when it was light enough to see each other's faces, one of them exclaimed that I was

the dervish travelling with the two Circassians who had stolen the talismans from the Jews. I jumped up and tried to fly to my cave, but they were too quick for me, and just as we reached your garden they snatched the bag which contained the little black pig and flung it into the sea. By this act, which delivers your son, I would pray you to forgive them for any wrongs they may have done you—nay more, that you will recompense them for it.'

The Bassa granted the holy man's request, and seeing that the two Jews had fallen victims to the charms of the Circassian ladies, gave his consent to their union, which was fixed to take place at the same time as that of Izaf with the wise Sumi. The Cadi was sent for, and the Jews exchanged the hats of their race for the turbans of the followers of the Prophet. Then, after so many misfortunes, the Bassa's three sons entreated their father to delay their happiness no longer, and the six marriages were performed by the Cadi at the hour of noon.

[*Cabinet des Fées.*]