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*Amru the Scribe Did Not Forget the Kindnesses
of His Friend Mamoun el Idrisi*

THE SULTAN'S JEST

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of "The Rajah's Gift" and "The Stranger From Kurdistan"

THE old sultan sat in his palace at Angor-lana, reflectively stroked his white beard, and smiled as one who recollects an ancient jest. And it was a grim jest that he had in mind, for, though his lips curled in the shadow of a smile, his keen old eyes flamed ominously from beneath brows that, rising to points in the center like Saracenic arches, heightened the sinister expression of his leathery features.

A capricious tyrant was this old despot who pondered on the doom to inflict upon his favorite, Dhivalani, the Kashmiri bayadere, and her lover, Mamoun el Idrisi, the existence of whose illicit amour he had sensed with uncanny intuition. And so sure was he of their guilt that he devised punishment in advance of any confirmation of his suspicions; devised punishment, and awaited the arrival of Ismail, his chief wazir, who had been commissioned to trap the bayadere and her lover, Mamoun of the great house of Idris.

The sultan yawned, as might a tiger consumed with ennui, then settled back among the cushions of his dais. His smile widened; but the sinister light did not fade from his eyes.

"Read!" he commanded, addressing Amru the scribe, who sat at his master's feet.

"The spider spins her web in the palace of Cæsar," began Amru in his rich sonorous voice that time had not

cracked, "and the owl stands watch in the tower of . . ."

"Enough!" snapped the sultan. "What news, Ismail?"

"A thousand years," greeted Ismail, bowing himself into the presence; "I have seized el Idrisi and Dhivalani."

"And who was the accomplice that has been smuggling Mamoun into the seraglio?"

"Saoud, the chief eunuch. He has just been sewed up in a bag and dropped into the river."

"Very good," commended the sultan. "Yes, it was just as I suspected. Mamoun has been swaggering about the court too proudly of late; Dhivalani has been entirely too vivacious; and Saoud has displayed more wealth than any honest eunuch could possibly accumulate. And so you trapped them? You did well, Ismail."

"My lord is an elephant of wisdom," observed the wazir, who was not blind to the sultan's pride in having so skilfully detected another palace intrigue. "And I, the least of his servants, have but acted upon his infallible judgment."

"Nevertheless, you did well. But tell me, Ismail, how shall we punish this Kashmiri and her lover?"

"Well . . . we might flay them alive and rub them with salt, or we might place them between planks and have them sawn asunder," suggested Ismail.

"Nonsense!" flared the sultan. "Have you no imagination? An amour is carried on in my own harem, under my very nose; and were it not for my intuition, it would still be going on. And here you suggest such commonplace punishments as though they had merely defrauded in the payment of the salt tax, or had stolen a prayer rug from the mosque!"

"My lord is a mountain of sagacity," interposed the wazir, penitently. "What would he suggest?"

The sultan shook his head despairingly.

"Ismail, you are an utter ass! You, my chief advisor, failing me when I am in need of wise counsel! I wish something novel in the way of punishment, and here you suggest the reward of a thieving camel driver!"

Odd and curious punishments were the sultan's forte; and on this occasion he demanded something distinctly different from the sanguinary slaughter and dismemberment that were the portion of petty offenders; he demanded a touch of the unique, something to tickle his sense of humor, of poetic justice. And far into the night the sultan and his chief wazir wrangled and debated, considering the matter from all angles.

All the while, Amru the scribe, whom the sultan had neglected to dismiss, nodded sleepily at the foot of his master's dais, and pondered on the exceeding folly and cruelty of old men who kept young and beautiful girls imprisoned in seraglios. He silently cursed the old man his master, who plotted strange vengeance after the fashion of a scholar resolving an abstruse problem; he cursed that fate which forced him, Amru, to sit impotently among scrolls and reeds, and hear of that which would leave the noble Idrisi a shapeless, mangled horror, a frothing, gibbering madman. And though the Prophet (upon whom be peace and power!) had denied

souls to women, he shuddered as he listened to that which might be the portion of the lovely bayadere.

And then a new touch was noted in the sultan's discourse; his imagination was asserting itself in a vein of savage humor that was a distinct departure from even his most novel devices. A decision had been formed. Amru heard, and hearing, gained hope. Reflectively, the old man fingered several gold pieces he had withdrawn from his wallet. To discover where the lovers were imprisoned was by no means impossible. There was still a chance, a chance he would take though it cost him his head; for Mamoun was the friend of Amru, and a noble young man who respected old poets. And as Amru listened to the sultan's perfecting of the device under consideration, his hopes flamed high and fiercely. A word, but a word or two. . .

Yet all this brave hope was vanity: for the sultan, after dismissing his wazir, addressed the scribe.

"Amru, due to my carelessness you have heard more than is good for you. Mamoun is your friend; and to leave you free to work your will tonight would inflict too great a strain upon your loyalty to me, your master."

The scribe's wrinkled features were devoid of expression as he met the sultan's hard, keen gaze; but he sensed that the sultan's intuition had divined his very thoughts.

"And to save you from being torn between loyalty to me and your friendship for Mamoun," continued the sultan, "I shall keep you within arm's reach until sunrise, after which it will be too late for you to be overcome by kindly sentiments."

Again the old despot smiled in anticipation of the doom that was to be inflicted the following morning.

"What is my lord's pleasure?"

"You shall spend the night in shackles at the foot of my couch,

guarded by one whose head shall answer for your continuous presence. Follow me."

SUNRISE awakened the fierce old sultan to thoughts of the day's wrath.

"Release him," he directed the sentry who had guarded Amru. And then to the scribe, "The few minutes between now and the appearance of the prisoners in the hall of audience can avail you naught. And thus have I saved you from choosing between fidelity to me, or to your friend, el Idrisi. To your duties, Amru!"

The sultan smiled ironically. But he did not observe the curious light in Amru's eye as the scribe bowed himself from the presence; nor did he observe that Amru fingered a golden coin.

It was but a few minutes after the morning prayer that Amru took his post at the right of the sultan's dais in the hall of audience. Disposing about him his inks, reeds, and scrolls, he awaited the appearance of the court, and the pronouncing of doom upon Mamoun and the lovely Kashmiri bayadere. And as he waited, Amru peered anxiously about him, and with nervous impatience.

A moment later Iftikar the executioner, a huge negro, nude save for a scarlet loin-cloth, made his appearance in the hall of audience. Instead of his ponderous, crescent-bladed simitar with which he usually executed the sultan's judgments, the African bore a tray upon which reposed two small flagons, and two large goblets of ancient, curiously wrought Cairene glass.

"And with you, exceeding peace," returned Amru in response to the negro's salutation. "But where is your simitar? Is this to be a drinking bout instead of a passing of judgment?"

"Who am I to question the master?" countered the executioner. "Though I doubt that he will make

me his cupbearer, for he claims that in the entire world there is no one who can make head and shoulders part company as neatly as I can," concluded the African with a justifiable touch of pride.

The negro turned to pick up the tray he had set on the steps of the dais.

"Just a moment, Iftikar," began the scribe; "since you have traveled so much, perhaps you can tell me what manner of coin this is."

The executioner took the proffered gold piece and examined it closely.

"It is a Feringhi coin, such as I once saw in the *souk* in Cairo," he announced. "And the image on it is that of an infidel sultan, upon whom be the wrath of Allah! But where did you get it?"

Before Amru could explain, a great gong sounded to announce the approach of the sultan and his court. The African tossed the gold piece to Amru, seized the tray, and took his post at the left of the judgment seat.

Eight cadaverous Annamite fan-bearers filed into the hall of audience and disposed themselves about the dais. Following them came a detachment of the guard, resplendent captains of horse, and pompously strutting officers of the sultan's household, officials, and distinguished visitors. Then came Ismail, the chief wazir, stalking majestically to his position on the topmost step, and to the left of the dais; and last of all, the sultan himself, lean, hook-nosed vulture, who, after taking his seat, signaled to Amru to read, as was the custom of the court, a verse from Al Qurán.

"By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkeneth," intoned the scribe, "thy lord hath not forsaken thee, nor hath he been displeased. . ."

"Sufficient! Bring in the prisoners!" commanded the sultan. And

again he smiled as one who contemplates a subtle jest.

Mamoun el Idrisi, handsome and arrogant, and calm in the face of certain and unpleasant doom, was escorted to the foot of the dais to face the sultan's wrath; and with him was the Kashmiri bayadere, the wondrously lovely Dhivalani, beautiful, and equally composed in the presence of her sinister lord and master. All hope was gone, if ever hope there had been. No mercy could be expected from that fierce old man who smiled evilly from his commanding position. They had had their hour or two of grace, had tempted fate, had lost; and the utter hopelessness of it all made them unnaturally calm and self-possessed.

"You, Dhivalani, who were my favorite, and you, Mamoun el Idrisi, upon whom I conferred wealth and honor," began the sultan, whose words rolled forth like the cruel, resistless march of destiny, "have merited the sentence I shall pronounce, and more. My father, upon whom be peace, boiled his favorite in a great caldron and fed the broth to her lover until he choked from having had his fill of the lady; and my grandfather, who sits in paradise at the Prophet's right hand, was even more severe."

The bayadere shuddered, more at the sultan's sardonic smile than at the horror he had mentioned. But Mamoun of the great race of Idris met the sultan's gaze unmoved.

"But I shall be merciful," continued the sultan. "No man or woman could live through enough torment to do you justice. In the end, you would die and cheat my vengeance; therefore have I devised so that your punishment shall outlast any that have ever before been inflicted. And to achieve that end, one of you must live."

The sultan paused to observe the effect of his words. In the eyes of each of the lovers he saw hope for the

other. And then that fierce old man signaled to the African to advance.

"Here you see two flagons of wine, and two glasses. One is pure, the other charged with a poison laden with all the slow torments and consuming flames of that hell reserved for the infidel. Dhivalani, you shall select a glass for yourself, and leave one for your lover. Each shall drink; and the survivor shall go into exile, free and unharmed. That I swear by the Prophet's beard, and in the presence of the lords of the court. Dhivalani, choose your glass; and if you live, may you live long with the knowledge that you poisoned your lover; Mamoun, drink the glass she leaves you, and if by chance you survive, be happy in the knowledge of the madness and torment that bought your worthless life for you."

The sultan nodded to the African, who poured from each flagon into the glass standing next to it, then, advancing a pace, offered the girl her choice.

With the air of one trapped in the mazes of a hideous dream, the bayadere extended her slim, jeweled arm to indicate the goblet which would doom her to life, or sentence her lover to live at her cost. And then she hesitated.

"May I taste each glass before I make my choice?"

"That you may not do; nor, having made your selection, may you drink together. Each must meet fate alone; therefore, choose, and be happy in your choice," concluded the sultan with a twisted, satiric smile.

"Son of a thousand pigs!" began el Idrisi hoarsely; "inflict whatsoever you will! Do you think that I will buy my life with hers?"

"Indeed? Then perhaps you would rather see her eaten by starving rats, or would you have her as your companion in a bed of quicklime?" And the sultan, in the monotone of a priest chanting a pagan hymn, enumerated

that which he could inflict even worse than that which he first mentioned.

"Therefore I fancy that you will accept my merciful sentence. And do not seek to arouse my wrath with rash words, hoping for a swift sword-stroke; for I have set my heart on this jest, and on none other. In half an hour I shall visit you to see whether you have drunk this wine. And if not, you shall both endure that which I but mentioned, and more whereof even I have not dreamed. Dhivalani," he concluded, "make your choice."

And at these words Dhivalani with a gesture indicated the glass from which she would drink, and that which would remain as the portion of her lover. A moment's pause; an exchange of glances; the half parting of lips speaking a speechless farewell; and then members of the guard, followed by slaves who bore the fatal wine, escorted the lovers to separate rooms where each would meet destiny alone, without even the solace of a word of farewell ere the swiftly spreading poison executed the sultan's vengeance.

An attendant approached and presented to Iftikar his great simitar; and other justice was dispensed, swift, sure, sanguinary. All the while the sultan smiled, as if in anticipation of a rare jest. At last he arose, dismissed the court, and, accompanied by Ismail, entered the room to which Mamoun had been taken to meet his fate.

EL IDRISI lay on the tiled floor. A pool of blood testified that a poniard which had eluded the search of the guard had done its work well.

"I have won!" gasped el Idrisi, exultantly. "By your oath, you must set her free, for I did indeed taste the wine, and the bitterness thereof. But rather than drink it and die by her choice, I am dying by my own hand."

To which the sultan smilingly retorted, "But you lose, Mamoun, for the bitterness which you tasted was but that natural to the wine. Neither glass was poisoned; and each of you was to be set free, forever to mourn in exile the life gained at the other's cost. I shall keep my oath and set her free, even as I would have done for you. You two might some day have met on the road of destiny; but now you die, knowing that you have sentenced her to believe that her choice gave her life at your cost."

"Father of many pigs," coughed el Idrisi, "you lie!"

"Then look, Mamoun, see whether or not this wine is poisoned."

And smiling at his own excellent jest, the sultan drank the wine at a draft.

THE next day a new sultan ruled in Angor-lana; for Amru, unable to warn the lovers of the sultan's jest, had in the kindness of his heart poisoned both flagons of wine while the African executioner had been examining the Feringhi coin.

