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The Guest of Karadak

Once—no more than once—have I seen a man dig his own grave. Though his eyes were keen, in that hour he was blind. Though he was favored and fortunate and a conqueror, it availed him not at all in that hour.

Concerning this man, some say—

“It was written, and what is written may not be altered.”

Others—and they are the mountain Kurds—say he was led to his fate by the hand of Sidri Singh. What my eyes have seen, I have seen, and I say that he dug his own grave, unknowing.

W'allahi, how many men have I seen in the hour of their death? I am Daril of the land of Athir. My clan is the Nejd and we are desert Arabs. In my youth I rode with the raiding bands—yea, and the banners of the clans. In those times the sword of Daril ibn Athir was not without honor.

When my years numbered fifty and eight I sheathed the sword, being weary of the war of clan against clan. It was the moment when the soul within cries, “Peace! Make thy peace.” I lingered at the sitting-place of the expounders of the Law, and the burden of their words was not otherwise.

“Make thy peace, that thy years be not troubled.”

But how—in what way?

I cannot read the written word of the Law. And where are the two who will agree as to the meaning of the words written? I listened, hearing much dispute, and learning little, for we of the *sahra* understand only a few words. It was said to me, “Give alms.” I gave then my tents and carpets, the silver jars and the silk of Cathay, the red leather and blue, clear glass—all that my hand had plundered.

They then said to me:

“Go thou upon the pilgrimage.”

And this also I did, taking leave of my followers and the keepers of my herds. For my sheep were numbered by the hundred, my saddle-horses by the score.

When I returned from Mecca and Bait al-Mukkudas to my district, I found there only a few of my men, who said that the herds had been carried off by raiders. They besought me to summon clansmen and companions-in-arms and ride and recover the herds. But I made answer that I had no wish to lift the standard of strife.

Nay, the blood was thin in my veins; the mail-shirt irked my stiff bones. I could no longer run beside a galloping horse and leap to the saddle; nor could I lean down from the saddle and slit in halves with my sword's edge a carpet laid in the sand.

"In poverty," I said, remembering some words of the expounders of the Law, "there is rest."

But who can sit in one place and eat out of another's bowl? Many men of the Nejd, remembering other days, came to me to have their wounds dressed and other ills healed, for they called me physician, praising my skill at letting blood from a vein, in judging the heat of fever. Thus the thought came to me to rise up and go upon a journey, naming myself a physician.

I would sheathe the sword forever, bearing only the unadorned blade of Damascus forging that I had carried as a youth. Daril, chieftain of Athir, would be Daril al Hakim—the physician. I meant to see new lands and visit the throne rooms of far kings—yea, the conquerors.

With this thought I set forth in the Year of the Flight, one thousand and twenty and nine.* I crossed the gulf to the coast of Iran. It is only a little way from the shore of the Nejd to the great island that lies in the throat of the gulf and to the land of the Iranis. Nevertheless, the *rais* of the vessel was afraid of pirates and more afraid of landing on this coast, though we had come to a walled town. He made me go down into a fisherman's craft, and the vessel turned its sail and went away.

I thought that I would buy a camel from these Iranis and go overland to the empire of Ind.

*By the Christian calendar, 1619. At that time the four great empires of Asia, stretching from the gates of Vienna to the Malay peninsula, were—as we moderns call them—Turkey, Persia, India, and China. In the narrative of Daril, Persia is called Iran, and the empire of the vastly powerful Moguls is Ind.

O, ye who listen, there is one thing true beyond doubt. He who sets forth upon a road may not know what the end of the road will be.

It was the season of the first rains, though no grass showed in the sand, and the cattle had not been led out into the valleys. I sat within the sea-gate of Bandar Abbasi, the walled town where the *rais* of the vessel had left me.

It is a good sitting place, the shadow of a brick arch of a gate. Here may be seen those who enter with their followers and animals. I listened to the talk of the shepherds and sellers of water who entered Bandar Abbasi.

I learned that this was a new port of the great Shah Abbas, the lord of Iran. Verily, it reeked of foulness and unclean dirt—the water was bad, and the horses, for lack of grain, fed on dried fish and camel flesh. Even the goat's milk that I drank tasted of fish. Many officers of the shah came and went through the gate, the lesser men hastening from their path and greeting them with low salaams, crying: "May God increase your honor!"

A hadji in a white turban spread his carpet opposite me and prayed in a loud voice at the hour of late morning prayer, and gathered listeners about him when he began to expound the Law. These disciples blocked the gate, and presently I heard curses.

Standing in the sun without, a Turkoman blind in one eye bade them clear his path. He puffed at a clay pipe that he held in his left hand, and he smelled of mutton grease and leather and dung. Indeed, the disciples of the hadji made way for him when they saw the long *tulwar* and the five or six knives in his girdle. The fingers of his right hand went from hilt to hilt and his one eye glared.

Seeing me, he took the pipe from his stained lips, and spat.

"By the beard and the teeth of Ali—what is this?"

He blinked at my striped headcloth and heavy, brown mantel, stared at my sandals and spat again.

"A dark, thin face. Ho, here is an Arab from Arabistan. Who art thou?"

"One who seeks the road to Ind," I made response.

"I know it well." The Turkoman came and squatted by me, on the side of his good eye. "It runs north along the river, then through the dry lands where the wells are a ride apart. Now it is a hard road; but after the first rains there will be water in the mountain gullies."

He pulled at his thin beard, eyeing me shrewdly.

"Ho, thou wilt need a companion to show the way, or horses—good mountain-bred beasts that will not give out—or weapons."

"Nay."

"Never say that." He wagged his head, his breath reeking of sour wine. "My brother, I know the track to Ind. I know the Kurds who will raid and rob thee, and the seven-times-accursed road guards of the Iranis who will lift thy wallet from thee as a price of their protection."

"Of thy wisdom," I made response, "canst tell me the hour of buying and selling in the *souk*—the marketplace?"

"In Bandar Abbasi there is no *souk*." He laughed. "The best of the animals were taken by the shah's *sipahis* in the marketplace—aye, and the girl-slaves. Now, the owners hide them. By the head of Ali, I can fetch thee a camel that is beyond price. A Bikanir racer worth a hundred silver sequins—aye, saddled as if for a prince and fit now for the road. Come and see!"

"Nay." I had seventy silver pieces in my girdle, and no mind for an affray.

"A white camel, swift-paced as the south wind."

"And are thy words as wind?"

This Turkoman was a fellow of resource.

"Abide here, O, *shaikh*," he cried, "and by the teeth of Ali, I wager thou'lt loose thy purse strings within the hour."

Rising, he departed, thrusting aside the beggars who thronged the gateway with their cries. Thrusting his pipe in his girdle-sack, he made off as one with a purpose formed.

True to his word, within the hour he came striding back, followed by a Baluchi with greasy ringlets who tugged at the nose-cord of a camel. And this, indeed, was a Bikanir fit to mount the courier of a king. Small in the head, smooth in gait, with belled trappings and a carpet saddle in place. Truly, a good beast, worth fifty silver pieces in the Nejd. The Baluchi made the white camel kneel near the brick arch of the gate and, when I had considered him, I offered thirty sequins.

"Now by all the companions and the ninety and nine names," swore the Turkoman, "this Arab would pluck the gall out of thee, little brother. I will attend to the matter, on thy behalf."

The Baluchi only smiled, twisting the cord in his fingers. He said the camel would bear a man forty leagues between sun and sun.

"At eighty pieces, this man makes no profit," put in the warrior.

I thought that the Baluchi might make little profit, indeed, for the tribesman meant to extort something from him.

"For the saddle also," I said, "I will give thirty and eight."

"Even an Armenian would pay more. With such a beast thou canst fly from all pursuit."

No doubt he thought me one of the Arabs who escape across the water from their foes. He knew much of the world, this Turkoman.

"From thy brother thieves?" I asked.

"Ho—from the ghosts of the dry lands, or the *ghils* that ride the winds. Nay, thou art bold of speech, O *shaikh*, and like unto a piece of my liver." He whispered hoarsely in my ear. "I will cheat the Baluchi who hath no more wit than a blind dog. I will persuade him to yield thee the racing camel for sixty and five sequins of full weight."

Thus we disputed the price, the Turkoman haggling loudly, now calling me his foster-brother, now cursing me for more than a grandfather of all usurers. In the end his haggling brought him no good. About midday came kettledrums down the street, and a thudding of hoofs in the dirt.

Crowding against the stalls on either hand, through rising dust, came a cavalcade of horses toward the gate. The leading riders cantered past, and I knew them for Kizil-bashis—Red Hats—the cavalry of Iran. They carried leather shields and tufted lances. They wore good mail shirts and the wide, red, cloth turbans that gave them their name.

The men around me pushed to get out of their way, and the white Bikanir rose to his feet, lurching hither and yon, so that the horsemen cursed, and one drove his stirrup into the belly of the Turkoman, who was unsteady on his feet and not inclined to move.

Before the warrior could get his breath, the Kizil-bashis were gone and a cavalcade of officers trotted through the dust. I saw the cloth-of-gold turban of a Sipahi Agha, a captain of cavalry. The best of the horses was a dun-colored mare.

This mare swerved and halted beside me. Its rider held a tight rein and sat in short stirrups. Upon him he had no mark of honor save a heron feather for turban crest. But the long, curved dagger in his girdle was gold-sheathed, with an emerald of great size upon the tip of the sheath.

"I will buy thy beast," he said to the Baluchi.

Those around me knelt and beat their foreheads in the dust—all but the Turkoman, who had drunk too much wine, and was angered, besides.

"Forty and five sequins were bid," he grumbled. "By the breath of Ali, my lord, thy price should be not less than that."

"Who bid the sequins?"

"He!" The thick-headed tribesman beckoned at me.

"And who art thou, O Arab?"

"Daril ibn Athir, of the Nejd."

"A warlike clan. Thy mission?"

"A *hakim*, journeying to Ind by the northern track."

The rider of the mare turned slowly and looked down at me. His full brown eyes were clear and alert. His body was thick and strong, his broad face sallow, his beard dark and close-clipped upon a wide chin. A man, I thought, sure of his strength—quick to anger, and accustomed to obedience.

This bearded Irani was leader of the Red Hats and, beyond doubt, an officer of the shah. From me he turned his attention to the camel, impatiently, and spoke to the servant who rode behind him. At once this follower counted out some silver pieces from a purse and cast them on the ground before the Baluchi.

"I bear witness," shouted the Turkoman, bending over to count the pieces, "that the sum sufficeth not. Here are no more than twenty sequins."

The rider of the dun mare seemed to smile, and spoke again. A foot follower hastened forward and caught the nosecord of the camel from the silent Baluchi. I looked for a tumult and outcry, since the bearded Irani had acted against the custom of open sale. Indeed, the Turkoman began to bellow like a wounded buffalo.

"*Hai-hai!* I bear witness, O hadji, the payment sufficeth not. Give heed, O hadji, and judgment—for this man hath been wronged and his property taken from him. Harken to the complaint, O thou of the pilgrimage performed."

Then the throng turned to look at the expounder of the Law who sat across the street with his pupils. Indeed, he wore the white turban of wisdom and authority. His fingers trembled upon his beard, and his eyes went this way and that. But he spoke no word of blame to the rider of the dun mare.

In my land, across the gulf, the chieftains obey the customs of the clan, but here in Iran it was otherwise. In a moment I saw the proof of it.

Three of the Red Hats dismounted, at a sign from their leader; they ran suddenly at the Turkoman, who was too bewildered with wine to take heed. One caught his arms behind his back, another seized his girdle and beard, while the third drew a small and thin knife.

The Turkoman fought like a buffalo, twisting and bellowing and butting. Eh, the moment had gone by when he could have drawn his weapons—and what avail to struggle without steel in the hand?

He went down, and the dust rose as they rolled about. Before long the three soldiers held him beneath them, and one of them lay across his chest, gripping his head. The thin knife was given the one who lay thus, and while the Turkoman screamed, the wielder of the knife thrust suddenly, once and again. Then the soldiers rose off the man and went to their horses, the one with the dagger wiping it clean on my cloak as he passed.

“Say, O physician,” cried the rider of the dun mare to me, “was it well done? Did the knife do its work?”

Wallahi—I saw then the face of the shaggy Turkoman, with blood running freely from under his brow. His lips drew back from his teeth—long, yellow teeth. No longer did he scream, but he panted with long gasps. His pallid blind eye rolled hither and yon, seeing naught. Indeed, he would never see again, for the knife had been thrust twice through his good eye.

“Truly, O my lord,” I made response. “He is blind, but I bear witness that the deed was not well done.”

And when the men of the Irani had withdrawn from the tormented one, taking his weapons with them, I stooped and began to staunch the flow of blood with a cloth from my girdle. The bearded rider reined his mare over against me, and I feared that punishment would be my lot, for I had spoken in anger.

“By the Ka’aba,” he laughed, “physicians are like to the readers of the Law, being jealous of another’s work and clamorous for reward. So, take this, and mend if thou canst what my man hath clumsily done.”

A heavy gold coin fell beside me in the blood-spattered dust. The Irani noble wheeled away; his men mounted and fell in behind him, thudding through the gate. The Baluchi hastened to gather up his coins and come and squat by me. But the Turkoman, when I would have bound his head, thrust out his arms and rose up, staggering. He cursed the rider of the mare, and I knew then that the name of the Irani who had blinded him was Mirakhon Pasha.

“This was to come upon my head,” said the Baluchi as we went from the gate. He spoke sadly, thinking of the little price that had been paid him for the camel, and I also thought with regret of the white Bikanir, because my desire to leave Bandar Abbasi increased within me.

"Still," muttered the Baluchi, "it was worse for him. He spoke in the teeth of Mirakhon Pasha. And he tasted his reward."

"Justly?" I asked, thinking of the hadji and his saying that men should taste of their deeds.

"*Vai!*" The Baluchi shook his ringlets and smiled. "Mirakhon Pasha is the master of the horse. If he did not use torment at times, men would not fear him."

"But he wronged thee in the matter of the price."

The man from the desert looked quite troubled, but presently his eyes brightened.

"Perhaps he had need of a camel. He goes upon a journey, it is said." And he looked at me eagerly. "Come, my lord, I can show thee other beasts that will please thee."

And before the evening prayer I bought a camel of him, with cloth and ropes for the saddle and a water skin, paying thirty and two silver pieces for all. Then I weighed the gold coin in my hand, the *tuman* that Mirakhon Pasha had tossed me.

"Canst find the Turkoman again?" I asked the man from the desert.

He nodded, saying that a wounded buffalo is easily tracked.

"Then bear him this," I said, "as a gift to the afflicted. Watch, then, that others do not see and take it from him."

This the Baluchi promised to do, but he explained that the Turkoman would not live long because the warrior had many enemies in Bandar Abbasi who would take his life in requital of old wrongs, now that he was helpless.

"O *hakim*," he said at parting, "thou art an old man, treading the way of justice. Take care upon the road. It would be well to wait for the great caravan of Mirakhon Pasha, who also takes the northern road tomorrow, through the mountains to the salt lake on the way to Ind."

But I thought of the Red Hat riders and the scarred face of the drunken warrior and of the trembling fingers of the hadji who had been afraid to speak. And when the Baluchi had gone upon his mission, I listened to the talk in the alleys and coffee stalls. Men spoke often of this caravan, and I learned the reason of its setting forth.

Mirakhon Pasha was the favorite of Shah Abbas, lord of Iran. Having the ear of the shah, he could gratify any whim without harm. No one dared complain of his deeds, and many stories were told of his strange entertain-

ments. He himself did not drink wine, but it pleased him to make others drunk when they were sitting at supper or coffee. He would give his guests first the wine of Shiraz, and then the full white wine of the mountain vineyards, then spirits, both hot and cold. It angered him if a visitor refused the cup. More than one worthy person who angered Mirakhon Pasha was beaten from his threshold by the cudgels of his slaves—yea, beaten through the streets with great outcry.

The favorite of the shah was best pleased when his guests became maudlin. When they quarreled or rolled upon the carpet among the dishes, he clapped his hands. And perhaps his ears caught many inklings of secrets at these drinking bouts. Once in the fort of Bandar Abbasi, he sent for the daughters of the chief men and made them drink wine in his presence.

Indeed, then some of the hadjis murmured publicly, and—hearing of this through his spies—Mirakhon Pasha summoned them and said, smiling:

“Is it true that the people of Bandar Abbasi did not enjoy my entertainment? That is hard to believe, because I summoned jugglers and wrestlers and the best of my boy dancers and gypsies to perform before the *hanims*.”*

He had brought in a throng of ignoble creatures that he carried about with him for amusement to perform their antics before these women, thus adding mockery to shame. And he had enjoyed himself very much.

“Eh,” he said again, “if the entertainment was not sufficient I will call in the officers of the Red Hats the next time.”

Thereupon the people of Bandar Abbasi grumbled in secret and praised Mirakhon Pasha loudly when he rode forth. Was he not the milk-brother of the shah? They had been nursed by the same woman, and the great shah always remembered this tie between them. Besides, Mirakhon Pasha pleased him.

For the favorite of the shah liked to wrestle with the heaviest of the wrestlers; he was a daring rider, and so great was his love of hunting that he seldom was without a leopard on his crupper to loose at antelope, or a falcon on his wrist.

He could put a swift horse to utmost speed and throw three javelins, one after the other, into a mark as he passed. Because of his great strength and sureness of eye he was dangerous with the sword in either hand. And

*Ladies—wives and daughters of distinguished men.

when he drew a weapon, he seldom sheathed it without slaying a man or a woman.

Perhaps because he trusted Mirakhon Pasha more than others, perhaps because he feared him a little, the shah had given command for him to go as ambassador to the court of the Emperor of Ind, to carry some valuable presents. And because pirates infested the Gulf at this season, Mirakhon Pasha had given up the idea of going from Bandar Abbasi on a ship, and was preparing to go over the desert road to the north and west.

Thus said the people in the marketplace of Bandar Abbasi, concerning Mirakhon Pasha, the lord or master of the horse. And when I had heard all the tale, I meditated and decided to set out alone upon the road. In setting forth, no man knows whether good fortune or calamity awaits him, but if he rides alone, at least, he will not suffer from evil companions.

And I had little in my bags. No more than sufficient millet and salt and rice and dates. What more is needed? I had, too, the copper pot and a slender knife and bow with forked arrows for striking down quail and sand grouse.

Except for my sword, with the damask work upon its blade and the ivory-and-horn hilt, and the silver in my girdle, no thief would covet aught of mine. Indeed, I have found that thieves come oftener to seek the goods of merchants and to hold them to ransom than they come to trouble an old physician who would fetch a small price as a slave.

So, as I had done in the Nejd, I placed my saddle-felt in a sandy hollow that first night. Here the road ran by a river of salt water, but I made my fire near a stream where the water was sweet and good. And, as in my land, I gathered roots and brush and tamarisk boughs sufficient to keep the embers of the fire aglow until dawn. This we do, so that a stranger may not miss our camp and our hospitality.

It is an old custom. Sometimes it brings strange guests. God knows best. That night the camel was already grunting in its sleep, and I had thrown more brush on the fire. I wrapped my mantle closer to my shoulders and loosened my girdle. The first quarter of the night had passed, but already the ground was chill. I was ready for sleep, because old blood courses slowly through the veins, and the blazing brush gave out a good warmth. My head was pressed against the sand when I heard the waterfowl flap up from the rushes, suddenly.

Eh, it was a sign. I listened, and in time heard horses moving along the hard earth of the trail. They moved slowly, often stumbling, and their rid-

ers did not speak. Drawing tight my girdle and taking my sword sheathe in hand, I sat up. There were two horses and they came forward as if their masters were fearful or wary.

And they halted in the outer blackness while one called—
“What man art thou?”

I rose and beckoned toward them. The voice had spoken in the Iranian tongue, yet not as one accustomed.

“Come,” I bade them. “The night is cold, and here is warmth. A *hakim*, I, from over the Gulf.”

Then cried out a woman’s voice, young and ringing with excitement:

“God hath led us aright. Here in the *thur* we have found a physician. Come!”

Through the brush that had screened them came two men and a woman. The leader was mounted on a foam-streaked Kabuli stallion, ungroomed and lean. Lean, and haggard, too, the rider, who wore a cloak that had once been part of a dress of honor. His turban was small, of a kind strange to me, and rings gleamed in his ears. His cheeks were fallen in, his eyes sunken, and he swayed in the saddle, supported by a wild-looking servant, armed with sword and shield. I thought at first the man on the stallion had been wounded.

“Are these the lands of Awa Khan?” he called to me hoarsely. “Can his tower be seen from here?”

I took his rein and greeted him, bidding him dismount and sit. The servant half lifted him down, though he looked like a man well accustomed to stirrup and saddle seat. When he stood on his feet he staggered, and again the follower steadied him. I saw then that the armed servant bore upon his shoulder a heavy bundle, cloth-wrapped.

“My lord,” I made response, “I have seen no tower, nor have I heard the name of Awa Khan.”

“That is a lie,” he muttered, glaring. “All these mountains know my cousin’s name, and he hath in his herds over a hundred sheep and a score of horses. His tower overlooks the dry lake, and he—and his sire before him—have had a hand in the making of wars.”

“O *hakim*,” the woman’s voice whispered at my side. “Heed him not. He has talked thus since the sun was overhead. His strength fails. Attend him, and thou wilt not fail of reward.”

She touched her arm, upon which was no more than a single silver armlet. And her long, loose hair was bound at the brow by no more than

a coral circlet of little worth. Though she was veiled, one shoulder was bare—yea, and shapely, and her slight body under its thin brown mantle stood straight and unbending. Verily, I thought these travelers had in their company a fourth, invisible, whose name was Poverty. And they lacked not pride. For the servant had carried the bundle, lest it appear that his master and mistress bestrode pack animals.

While the servant spread cloths by the fire, I supported the master, and felt within his veins the heat of devouring fever. In spite of this he wore upon his body a shirt of heavy mail. Without cessation he muttered to himself, calling out the name of this man and that, as if he were attended by many followers. Later it became clear to me that he was naming warriors who had once been his companions. Indeed, he was himself a leader of warriors, but now when his wits wandered under the scourge of fever, he imagined himself still in the midst of an armed host.

“Ho,” he grimaced. “Align the spears! Is thy shield to be carried thus, Rai Singh? Where went the standard? I see it not. Nay, was it in my keeping?” He peered around him, his blood-streaked eyes moving slowly under knitted brows. “The tower of my cousin should be here. We rode far this day—far.”

Thus did his mind wander from an imaginary host to his quest for the tower of Awa Khan.

“After dawn,” I said to the sick man, “thou wilt look for the abode of thy cousin. But now it is dark, and nothing can be seen.”

Indeed, in this bare plain the starlight was dim, and the chill of the ground made a little mist—very different from the clear nights of my *sahra*. I helped the servant to lay him upon the bed. I loosened the turban cloth, but he would not suffer me to draw off the mail shirt. The long hair around his forehead was damp, and he breathed with swift gasps. I counted his heartbeats, and signed to the woman to come near.

“How long has he been thus?”

“Since three days. We wandered from the road, and now I think we are near a city of the Irani. Is it far to Bandar Abbasi, upon the sea? I will take my father there and he shall rest until he is well!”

“If God wills.” I thought of the wearied horses and wondered if the sick man would live to reach Bandar Abbasi. “First he must be bled—a very little.”

The woman then came close to me, looking into my eyes. She clasped her hands upon her breast and I thought that she was still a child in years.