

The Diamonds of Shomar's Queen

Shafts from an Eastern Quiver, #1

by Charles Mansford, 1863-1943

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Chapter I

„I FANCY that Hassan has been drawing on his imagination again, old fellow,” said my companion, Frank Denviers, as we sat conversing one evening at the door of our tent.

„Perhaps so,” I responded, puffing away at a hookah; „he has his faults, like the rest of these Arabs. To appropriate everything that he can lay his brown paws on is, to him, a cardinal virtue; still, he hasn’t told us anything untrue so far, why should he do so now?”

„You have far too much faith in that nigger!” replied Frank; „he pitches yarns to us that no one could possibly believe. We certainly expected him to steal, and, so far, he has come well up to the standard we measured him by. I own that his knowledge of the various ruins to which he has led us is decidedly good; no doubt this wonderful city that we are bound for does exist, but, as to the diamonds—don’t you wish you may get them!” And he shouted to Hassan, who was a little distance off reclining under the shade of a palm tree—

„Coffee, and hurry about it too!” for the Arab was accustomed to take his time when disturbed from his siesta, although usually he was agile enough.

Illustration:
Hassan.

Our Arab servant, or „nigger” as my companion sometimes termed him, had been engaged as a runner or letter-carrier, until it chanced that we took him into our service on the recommendation of an Arab sheik. Frank Denviers and I, Harold Derwent, had been for some time wandering in Arabia, and already had been to most of the famous cities visited by Europeans. Previous to setting out on our

present strange quest we had disguised ourselves as sheiks and secretly visited Mecca just as the haj, or annual pilgrimage, was commencing. For the whole time through which the fair lasted we found thousands of pilgrims who poured into Mecca from Persia, Arabia, Egypt, and Syria well worthy of observation, as they came to be blessed at the birthplace of Mahomet.

Hassan had been of great service to us in the sacred city, and his desire to continue with us probably induced him to tell us the legend of the *Diamonds of Shomar's Queen*, when he received an intimation that we thought of returning to England, when his employment as our guide would, of course, cease. His features were bronzed with sun and exposure to the wind, so that he seemed even more swarthy than the rest of his tribe, while the spotless white turban which he invariably wore served to heighten the effect still further. Besides his experience, which had benefited us considerably in our travels, he was a man upon whom we could depend in time of danger, for his bravery had more than once been put to the test when our course lay through unsettled districts. Added to these qualities he had an admirable way of relating in his own language the various legends which are connected with many of the singular ruins which we visited. It was chiefly owing to this power that Frank came to the conclusion that the Arab was accustomed to mix fables and facts together until he was unable to distinguish between them.

It was our custom when the day had declined to sit before our tent and listen to Hassan as he recounted some one of his numerous legends. While we drank our coffee the Arab would throw himself at full length upon the ground, and, resting his chin upon his crossed arms, look away dreamily into the distance. His voice then assumed a different tone; he was no longer the servant of two Englishmen but a child of the East, and one who sometimes seemed to forget that we were present at all.

It happened that one evening during our stay in Mecca, where, for the time being, we enjoyed the luxury of a roof other than that of our tent, a pilgrim passed by who differed considerably from any of those we had already seen. We were sitting at the door, and summoned Hassan to tell, if he could, the district from which the stranger came. Eyeing him closely, the Arab described him as one living in the neighbourhood of Metra, a city of ruins, but which still possessed an absorbing interest for those who knew its history and what it contained.

When Hassan had excited our curiosity sufficiently, he suddenly stopped, and asked when we intended to return to England. Hearing the time fixed upon, he made an expressive gesture, and replied—

„Then the great secret of Metra will not be known to you. The city is twenty leagues from here, yet it is worth a visit; aye, and more, it has that in it which would astonish the sahibs to see.“

„Very likely,“ responded Frank; „all these places you have taken us to have been surprising in their way, but one gets tired even of wonders.“

„The sahib is speaking true,“ responded Hassan, „but this wonder is the greatest of them all. The stranger, whom you have just noticed, knows well what is hidden in Metra, but he dare not venture thither for his life—“

„And you, Hassan,“ I interrupted, „have you seen this wonder of which you speak?“

He gave a gesture of assent as he answered—

„I have seen the city, but have not viewed its treasure; no Arab could look upon it and live, for, by the beard of Mahomet, if he ventured there, surely kismet would follow him in Shomar's name.”

„Well,” said Frank, „if you want to persuade us to travel there, you had better tell us what the city does contain if you know; I daresay, like all your yarns, it is strictly genuine, considered from the standard of an Arab code of morals.”

That same evening Hassan related to us the legend, and the result of it was that we agreed not only to visit the city, but to give him a sum of gold if our enterprise proved successful, for he would not accept our offer of a share in the treasure.

So matters stood, and our tent was at this time within a few miles of the city to which we were bound when the conversation between Frank and myself took place as narrated. Hassan, when called, came slowly forward and disappeared within the tent, soon afterwards reappearing with the beverage which he had been ordered to prepare.

„When will the sahibs be ready to visit the city of Metra?” Hassan asked, as he stood before us.

„You say it is but three miles hence,” said Frank, „and it now wants two hours to sunset; I think we might venture there to-day.” Then, eyeing the Arab, he asked—

„Do you still declare that this treasure is to be found there, or is it, after all, one existing only in your own imagination?”

„The sahib is not ready of belief,” replied the Arab, „but he will soon learn that I have spoken the truth.”

„Rest there,” said Frank, pointing to the ground just before our feet, „and repeat this story, that we may be able to judge of your sincerity.”

Hassan posed his body in the usual attitude which he assumed on such occasions, and, while Frank and I listened to his narrative, to detect if possible any discrepancies, the Arab half spoke, half chanted to us the legend of *The Diamonds of Shomar's Queen*, as he had heard it from the inhabitants of the district around Metra.

Chapter II

„IN Arabia the Happy,” began Hassan, „there ruled, more than two thousand years ago, a famous king named Shomar—”

„A legend of the good old times, evidently,” interrupted Frank, as he looked at the Arab with an incredulous air.

„Shomar,” continued the narrator, „was powerful but he was not happy, for among the princes of his court was one who had great wealth and influence. He did not address the king in the humble tones which the rest of the courtiers adopted, and soon grew into disfavour. The ambassadors, who came at this time from the court of Persia, paid such marked deference to the prince that Shomar's jealousy was aroused, and he sought for some opportunity to free himself from this subject, whom he feared might one day seize upon his throne. Then arose a

rumour that, in a distant part of Arabia, a revolt had arisen, and Shomar accused the prince of having instigated it. The latter hotly denied the charge, and, as the king persisted in it, drew his sword as if about to attack the monarch as he sat on his throne. There was a cry of *treason!* which rang through the palace, and in another minute the prince was vainly struggling with his monarch's bodyguard.

Illustration:

There was a cry of *treason!*

„Shomar looked triumphantly at his subject as the latter stood bound before him, a few days afterwards, to listen to the sentence which his offence was to receive. The king would gladly have ordered the executioner to bowstring the hateful subject, but he feared the effect of this upon the people. So the prince was sentenced to perpetual exile in a remote district, and threatened with death if he returned. Setting out with his wife and young daughter, together with a few faithful servants, the prince reached the place of his banishment, and for several years nothing more was heard of him.

„One day a band of pilgrims passed through the king's territory, and one of them craved an audience of the monarch. He conveyed strange tidings to the king, for the exiled prince had founded a wonderful city, Metra, to which we are bound“; and the Arab paused for a moment.

„Go on,“ said Frank; „we are waiting to hear about these diamonds which you mentioned before.“

„Patience!“ replied Hassan, you shall hear. The prince, after wandering about year or so, determined to build a city, but feared lest his monarch, hearing of it, should send a body of soldiers afterwards to demolish the edifices. During his journeys he had passed more than once through a mighty ravine in the rocks, and a strange thought occurred to him. He communicated his views to his companions in exile, and they agreed to his proposal. The rocks on each side of the ravine were composed of a stone which resembled marble in its colour and hardness, yet they began to excavate it, and before long had hollowed out several caves for themselves. Then the prince—who was still wealthy—promised an enormous diamond to whoever would carve best a palace for him. Skilful men came, and, eager for the promised reward, laboured incessantly; before long the ravine became a pathway on either side of which magnificent marble palaces stretched one after another for over three miles, and the inhospitable place now became a city more beautiful than poets have dreamed of. To own a palace in Metra became the height of a prince's ambition, and over them all the exiled one ruled. When he died his daughter, who had grown to be a beautiful woman, took her father's place and ruled as the Princess *Idaliah*.“

„Who possessed these diamonds, I think you told us,“ interposed Frank. The Arab seemed to scarcely notice the interruption, and went on—

„So the princes who dwelt in the marble palaces of Metra wooed the princess, but without success, for she secretly despised them. During her childhood, while her father was still a wandering exile, she had come to know a young and hardy mountaineer, and the friendship of childhood grew deeper and stronger as they became older. Her suitors hated the mountaineer, but were afraid to show this, so

they planned how they might rid themselves of him. The pilgrim who conveyed the information to Shomar of the wonderful city arisen was sent by them. The king, on hearing of the beauty of Idaliah, determined to see her, and shortly afterwards visited her palace in disguise. If the princes admired her, the king did more; he was infatuated, and, after trying in vain to win her love, made known his real rank. Then said the princess, as she sat on her throne while the monarch flung himself in entreaty before her—

Illustration:

The monarch flung himself in entreaty before her.

„Rise, I am but thy inferior; it is not fitting that the great Shomar should wed with a subject. There are dark-eyed maidens at the Courts of Persia and the other neighbouring realms, there wilt thou find a princess of royal blood whom thou mayest thus honour; and she stretched out her hand as if to raise the monarch from his lowly position. The latter caught it eagerly and pressed it to his lips, while a burning blush suffused the princess's features. Then she said humbly, with downcast eyes—

„Know, O King, that the love of Idaliah is already pledged.“

„To whom?“ asked the monarch, rising and standing before the princess, furious at his own want of success. Then Idaliah told, with many a becoming blush and sigh, of the young mountaineer. Shomar's face grew dark as the story was concluded, then he asked—

„And, if he lived not, wouldst thou accept the half of my throne?“ The princess shook her head negatively as she replied—

„I could not, for I would lament him many years; my heart even tells me that, if evil befell him, I should die.“

„So the king departed from her presence, and plotted with the princes to take the mountaineer's life. Although Haifiz, as he was called, dared not pass through the ravine, because of his rivals, yet by stealth he would visit Idaliah. Lithe and active, he climbed down the rocky slope between two of the palaces; a jutting piece of stone, the slight support of a young tree, anything that he could grasp was sufficient for him, for was not this perilous pathway that which led to the palace where the light of love shone for him alone in the eyes of Idaliah.“

Hassan paused for a moment; then his voice grew softer and his eyes moist as he sorrowfully continued—

„Now the princess used to place a light in the window of the highest apartment of her palace, and the rivals of Haifiz discovered this signal to the lover that all was safe for his venture. They observed the way in which he had hitherto escaped their ambushes, and at last had him in their power. One night Idaliah had placed the signal as usual, and, sitting on her throne adorned with a magnificent diamond necklace, which had been given to her by her father, she waited for the well-known footsteps of her lover. He did not come, and an uneasy feeling filled the maiden's breast as she waited; then a noise was heard of steps resounding on the marble palace floor.

„Four men entered, bearing a heavy burden, which they placed at the feet of the unhappy princess. A tree by which the lover was accustomed to swing himself

from one ledge to another had been partly uprooted, for, on taking it in his hands, it gave way, and he fell headlong down the steep ravine, bruised and lifeless! So the body was sent for the princess to view, for the enemies of her lover rejoiced, in the success of their foul stratagem.

Illustration:

He fell headlong down the steep ravine.

„Idaliah looked at the mangled form for a moment, then, sighing deeply, was silent. So still she sat, that at last the bearers of the burden attempted to arouse her. They started back in horror, for the princess was as pale and lifeless as her lover! She seemed to have been turned to stone by the terrible shock.

„When Shomar heard this, he was struck with sorrow at the effect of his callous plot. He commanded that the city should be deserted by its inhabitants, and vowed that the princess should bear his name in death, for although he lived many years after people spake of the dead princess alone as Shomar’s queen. The palace was left untouched; no one dared to move the bodies of the dead lovers. The strangest part of the narrative is, that for all the time which has ensued the forms have not changed. Idaliah sits there to-day, and her lover lies at her feet, as if the two figures had been carved out of marble. When Shomar, years after, learnt this, he gave the palace into the charge of an old crone, upon whose death the duty passed into the hands of the oldest living female in her tribe—the same as that of the man concerning whose country you questioned me. Although this event happened, as you have been told, more than two thousand years ago, there is still an old crone who fulfils Shomar’s command, and only opens the palace gate on receiving a certain signal. Sitting there is Idaliah, still wearing the necklace of diamonds, which no Arab may touch, for Shomar, although dead, yet haunts the palace, and prays the maiden’s pardon for his crime. His curse would blight the one of my race who touched the sparkling stones: will ye, then, dare to venture thither to obtain them?“

Hassan rose and stood before us as he finished the legend.

„Do you know this signal?“ I asked, endeavouring to speak calmly. The Arab answered in the affirmative, whereupon Frank remarked—

„I will believe that the lovers still occupy the palace, and that the diamonds are there, when I see them“; and he smiled at my faith in the truth of the Arab’s story.

Chapter III

AT sunset we left our tent, and, following Hassan, journeyed in the direction of Metra. At last our guide stopped, and when we had joined him, he observed:

„We are just about to enter the ravine. What plan is to be adopted in order that you may enter the palace we are seeking?“

„You say that the gates are kept by one person only,“ I replied; „surely if they are opened upon your giving the signal, we should have no difficulty in passing into the palace.“

„The sahib is mistaken,” responded Hassan, „for the gates are solid stone, and move by touching a spring within. It will be difficult for you: the crone will not suspect an Arab, but, on seeing two men of an unknown nation, she will have little confidence in you.“

„Then,” interposed Frank, turning to me, „our plan is easily settled. On arriving at these stone gates, Hassan may give the signal, and enter alone. He can learn from within the secret of the hidden spring; this done he must find some way to escape the crone’s observation, and so let us into the palace.“

„The crone is exceedingly aged,” said Hassan; „if once we are all within there should be no difficulty in keeping her from doing harm; but I would rather not remain in the palace while you obtain the treasure.“

„Yet,” said Frank to me aside, „he has no objection to lead us to this place where the diamonds are said to be! It is a strange scruple; still, if he objects to remain with us, we will leave him outside, where he may be useful as a guard should anyone learn that we are plundering the palace.“

We plunged through a dense thicket; on emerging we observed that the ravine then began and sloped gently. On we went, our faith in Hassan being strengthened each minute as we saw the wonderful palaces carved out of the solid rock, and standing almost unaffected apparently by the length of time that had elapsed. Casually resting my hand for a moment upon one of the chiselled doorways, I observed that it crumbled into dust as I did so. Hassan informed me that something which exhaled from the rock gave it an outward appearance of being hard and highly polished, although in reality the substance was decomposed.

Passing along we at last reached a magnificent palace, and before it loomed gigantic marble gates. My hope that these were also decayed by age vanished, for, on striking one of them with the hilt of my dagger, it gave forth a dull sound. We looked well to the condition of the pistols which were worn in our belts, and then motioned to Hassan to give the signal. Crouching behind a pillar, so that we could not be observed, we waited anxiously to see what would be the result. The Arab had evidently learned the right signal to give, for suddenly the marble gates were raised like a portcullis, and a strange-looking being screamed rather than said to him:

„Can ye not let Shomar’s queen reign over the dead one in peace?” She was indeed aged; her form was nearly doubled, her eyes, like small black beads, looked forth from a yellow shrunken face, while the hand which she raised almost threateningly at Hassan bore nails that seemed like the talons of some bird of prey.

„I come from where once dwelt Shomar,” said the Arab, then he stooped forward, and whispered something to her. The crone allowed him to pass, and before we could see more the gates fell instantaneously into their former position. It was fully ten minutes before they lifted again. In a second Frank and I darted through the entry. Hassan was barely outside before the gates once more descended with a dull thud, and we were shut within the palace.

„We are in for it, I expect,” said Frank; „there was no time to ask Hassan how these gates unfasten. Look at the old crone, she has discovered the trick!“

It was an evil-looking face that peered into ours, and for a moment my hand wandered to where my dagger was placed.

Illustration:

It was an evil-looking face.

Frank pushed her aside, and strode on in the direction of the main apartment, according to the information which Hassan had given us of its whereabouts. I followed closely, the crone raising wild howls of rage as we went along, even throwing herself several times before us, and trying to bar our way with her distorted body. The palace seemed perfect; not a stone nor a carving showed marks of age. There was an immense curtain of a material resembling purple velvet before us. We dragged it back upon the golden rods which supported it, and then stood still for a minute, completely astonished at what we saw.

Sumptuous furniture of the East filled the apartment. There were magnificent burnished mirrors hanging upon the walls, which themselves were a mass of minute carvings representing battle scenes and other events of those bygone years. The skins of many animals lay about the apartment, and in the centre of it stood the throne of the one who is known in the Arabic legends as Shomar's queen.

A ray of light seemed to enter from above, and fell upon the throne. There, seated upon it, was a form whose loveliness seemed more than human. Her face, and bust, and snowy arms seemed as if carved out of the material of which the palace was constructed. Her robes were fitting for the rank which she had occupied in life, while at her feet lay the murdered form of her lover! My heart beat violently and I turned to my companion, as I said excitedly—„Hassan has told us the truth! Do you see them?“ and I pointed to the diamonds that flashed like stars around the neck of the princess.

Frank was silent for a moment, then he answered—

„Who could have expected such a story to be true? It seems like robbery to remove the diamonds, but they are useless to the dead, and to us mean an immense fortune.“

We passed up to the centre figures the palace chamber. The crone guessed our intention, and, flinging herself upon Frank, vented her fury upon him. He seized her, and, despite her struggles, held her fast as he called to me:

„Quick! get the diamonds, while I keep this hag away from you.“

Illustration:

Quick! get the diamonds.

I stretched forth my hand nervously and clasped the diamonds. As I did so the form which wore them seemed to change, then suddenly it disappeared, and nothing but a small heap of dust was to be seen! The perspiration stood in beads upon my forehead; I turned to Frank to see if he had observed what had happened, but he was still engaged in keeping the hag from attacking me. I drew off the silken sash which I wore and rolled the diamonds within it, as I said:

„I have obtained them—quick! to the gates! I am nearly suffocated in this close atmosphere.“

He lifted the crone bodily into the air, and, holding her thus, passed with me to the entrance. Here she sullenly refused to show us the hidden spring, and, in spite of our threats, remained obdurate. It was some time before we could devise a way of escaping. At last I managed to scrape a hole in the side of the entry near the gates, and into this we thrust as many cartridges as we could spare. Breaking some of them open, I laid a small train, and, keeping as far away as possible, managed to make a spark and thus to fire it.

There was a tremendous explosion, which resounded through the empty palace, and to our joy a hole was blasted sufficiently large for a man to creep through. I passed through it first, then Frank hurled the crone from him and followed me. We could hear her howls of disappointment at our escape, as Hassan rejoined us, who was elated at our success, and the knowledge that the reward which we had promised him would soon be his.

The diamonds were bought from us eventually by a syndicate of London merchants, the largest one of the stones alone being of more value than we had anticipated the entire necklace of seventeen to be worth. The wearers of them, as they see the light sparkling from the gems, little suppose that they are adorned with the diamonds of Shomar's queen.

We did not part with Hassan after all, for we decided to extend our travels eastward, owing to the success of this strange adventure.

