

A Legend of Love

By Lafcadio Hearn

Djemil the Azra said: "While I live, my heart will love thee; and when I shall be no more, still will my Shadow follow thy Shadow athwart the tombs." . . .

Thou hast perchance beheld it,—the strong white city climbing by terraces far up the mountainside, with palms swaying in the blue above its citadel towers, and the lake-waters damascened by winds, reflecting, all-quiveringly, its Arabian gates and the golden words of the Prophet shining upon entablatures, and the mosque-domes rounded like eggs of the Rok, and the minarets from which the voice of the muezzin comes to the faithful with dying redness of sunset: "O ye who are about to sleep, commend your souls to Him who never sleeps!"

Therein also dwelt many Christians,—may their bones be ground and the names of them forever blotted out! Yea; all save one, whose name I have indeed forgotten. (But our master the Prophet hath written the name; and it hath not been forgotten by Him who never forgets,—though it be the name of a woman!) Now, hard by the walls of the city there is a place of sepulchre for good Moslems, in which thou mayst see two graves, the foot of one being set against the foot of the other; and upon one of these is a monument bearing a turban, while the form of the tumulary stone upon the other hath only flowers in relief, and some letters of an obliterated name, wherefore thou mightst know it to be the grave of a woman. And there are cypress-trees more ancient than Islam, making darkness like a summer's night about the place.

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Slender she was as the tulip upon its stalk, and in walking her feet seemed kisses pressed upon the ground. But hadst thou beheld her face unveiled, and the whiteness of her teeth between her brown lips when she smiled! . . . He was likewise in the summer of his youth; and his love was like the love of the Beni-Azra told of by Sahid Ben-Agba. But she being a Christian maiden and he being a good Mussulman, they could not converse together save by stealth; nor could either dare to let the matter become known unto the parents of the other. For he could not indeed make himself one of the infidel—whose posterity may God blot out!—neither could she, through fear of her people, avow the faith of the Prophet!

Only through the lattice of her window could she betimes converse with him; and with the love of each other it came to pass that both fell grievously ill. As to the youth, indeed, his sickness so wrought upon him that his reason departed, and he long remained as one mad. Then at last, recovering, he departed to another place, even to the city of Damascus,—not that he might so forget what he could not wish to forget, but that his strength might return to him.

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Now the parents of the maiden were rich, while the youth was poor. And when the lovers had contrived to send letters one unto the other, she sent to him a hundred dinars, begging him, as he loved her, that he should seek out an artist in that city, and have a likeness of himself painted for her that she might kiss it. "But knowest thou not, beloved," he wrote, "that it is contrary unto our

creed; and in the Last Day what wilt thou say unto God when He shall demand of thee to give life unto the image thou hast had wrought?" But she replied: "In the Last Day, O my beloved, I shall answer, Thou knowest, O Most Holy, that Thy creature may not create; yet if it be Thy will to animate this image, I will forever bless Thy name, though Thou condemn me for having loved more than mine own soul the fairest of living images Thou hast made." . . .

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But it came to pass in time that, returning, he fell sick again in the city which I speak of; and lying down to die, he whispered into the ear of his friend: "Never again in this world shall I behold her whom my soul loveth; and I much fear, if I die a Mussulman, lest I should not meet her in the other. Therefore I desire to abjure my faith, and to become a Christian." And so he died. But we buried him among the faithful, forasmuch as his mind must have been much disturbed when he uttered those words.

And the friend of the youth hastened with all speed to the place where the young girl dwelt, she being also at the point of death, so grievous was the pain of her heart. Then said she to him:

"Never again in this world shall I behold him that my soul loveth; and I much fear if I die a Christian, lest I should not meet him in the other. Therefore I give testimony that there is no other God but God, and that Mahomet is the prophet of God!"

Then the friend whispered unto her what had happened, to her great astonishment. But she only answered: "*Bear me to where he rests; and bury me with my feet toward his feet, that I may rise face to face with him at the Day of Judgment!*"