

# The Story of Prince Alasi and the Princess Firouzkah

By William Beckford

I reigned in Kharezme, and would not have exchanged my kingdom, however small, for the Calif Vathek's immense empire. No, it is not ambition that has brought me to this fatal place. My heart, so soon to burn in the fires of the divine vengeance, was armed against every unruly passion; only the calm and equable feelings of friendship could have found entrance there; but Love, which in its own shape would have been repelled, took Friendship's shape, and in that shape effected my ruin.

I was twenty years of age when my father died; and I regretted his loss sincerely, not only from natural affection, but also because I regarded kingship as a burden very heavy to be borne.

The soft delights of the harem had little charm for me; the idea of marriage's more formal bonds attracted me even less. I had been solemnly betrothed to Rondabah, Princess of Ghilan, and this contract, entered into by my father on my behalf, for the good of the two countries, was one which I could not lightly venture to cancel. All I could dare to allow myself was delay.

With this almost misanthropic repulsion from the ordinary ways of men, I had to ascend a throne, to govern a numerous people, to endure the ineptitude of the great, and the folly of the meaner folk, to do justice to all, and, in a word, to live among my subjects. But in those days generosity and virtue were not to me mere vague and empty words. I fulfilled all my duties exactly, and only from time to time indulged in the delights of solitude. A tent, disposed after the Persian manner, and situated in a dense forest, was the place where I spent these moments of retirement, moments that always seemed to pass too quickly. I had caused a considerable number of trees to be cut down so as to leave an open clearing of fair size, and had filled this clearing with gay flowers, while round it coiled a moat whose waters were as clear as those of Rucnabad. Near this bright spot, which I used to liken to the moon shining full-orbed in the dark blue of the firmament, I often admired the gloomy depths of the enfolding woods, and strayed in their recesses, to dream!

One day, when, stretched at length upon the moss, I was caressing a young deer that would come tame to my hand, I heard the sound of a horse galloping—not far distant; and soon after a rider came in view, who was unknown to me. His dress was outlandish, his countenance fierce, his eye haggard. But he did not long keep my attention. An angelic form, in a boy's dress, soon riveted my gaze. The stranger held this lad, who seemed most graceful, most delicately fashioned, straitly clasped to his breast, and seemed anxious, as I thought, to prevent him from calling for help. Outraged by what I took to be an act of lawless violence, I rose, I barred the stranger's way, I flashed my sword in his eyes, and cried: "Stop, wretch! Do you dare commit this wrong in the sight of the King of Kharezme?"

Scarcely had I uttered these words, when the stranger sprang to the ground, without releasing his precious charge, and said, saluting me with every mark of respect: "Prince Alasi, you are the very object of my search. I wish to entrust to you a treasure beyond all price. Filanshaw, King of Shirvan, the intimate friend of the king your late father, is reduced to dire extremity. His rebellious subjects hold him besieged in the citadel of Samakhié. The troops of Calif Vathek are upholding them in their revolt. They have sworn the utter ruin of their sovereign. Filanshaw accepts undaunted the decrees of Fate so far as he himself is concerned, but anxious, if that be yet possible, to save alive his only son, the lovely child whom you see here, he has commanded

me to place him in your hands. Hide this pearl of incomparable price in your bosom; suffer its origin, the shell in which it was formed, to remain unknown, until such time as the years bring security. And so farewell. I fear pursuit. Prince Firouz will himself tell you all else that you may wish to know.”

I had, while he was speaking, opened my arms to Firouz, and Firouz had sprung into them. We held one another embraced with a tenderness that seemed to fill the stranger with satisfaction. He mounted his horse, and was gone in a moment.

“Oh, take me hence,” then said Firouz; “now indeed do I fear to fall into the hands of my persecutors. Ah! would they tear me from the side of the friend Heaven has given me—the friend towards whom my whole heart gives one bound?”

“No, dear child,” cried I; “nothing shall tear you from my side. My treasures, my army, all I have, shall be used for your protection. But why hide your birth here in my dominions, where no harm can come to you?”

“Nay, it must be so, my most generous defender,” rejoined Firouz; “my father’s foes have sworn to extirpate his race. They would brave death itself in obedience to their oath; they would stab me in your very presence if I were recognised. The man who brought me here, and has guarded me through my infancy, will do all he can to persuade them I am no longer alive. Find some one to father me—it matters not whom—I shall have no other pride save that of loving you, and deserving that you should love me in return.”

Thus speaking, we came to the tapestried enclosure that surrounded my Persian pavilion, and I ordered refreshments to be brought but neither of us did more than taste of them. The sound of Firouz’s voice, his words, his looks, seemed to confuse my reason, and made my speech come low and haltingly. He perceived the tumult raging in my breast, and, to appease it, abandoned a certain languor and tenderness of demeanour that he had so far affected, and assumed the childish gaiety and vivacity natural to his years, for he did not appear to be much more than thirteen.

“How,” said he, “have you nothing here except books? No instruments of music?”

I smiled, and ordered a lute to be brought. Firouz’s playing was that of a master. He sang and accompanied himself with so much feeling, with such grace, that he raised in my breast another storm of emotion, which he again was careful to dispel by innocent mirth.

Night came on, and we separated. Though happy beyond what I had conceived possible, I yet desired to be alone. I felt the need of introspection. This was not at first easy: all my thoughts were in confusion! I could not account to my own self for the agitation of feeling I had experienced. “At last,” said I,

Heaven has hearkened to my dearest wish. It has sent me the true heart’s-friend I should never have found in my court: it has sent him to me adorned with all the charms of innocence—charms that will be followed, at a maturer age, by those good qualities that make of friendship man’s highest blessing—and, above all, the highest blessing of a prince, since disinterested friendship is a blessing that a prince can scarcely hope to enjoy.”

I had already extended beyond its customary term the time I devoted to seclusion and solitude. My absence, so short to myself, seemed long to my people, and a return to Zerbend became imperative. Some days before we left our retreat, I caused a shepherd living in the neighbourhood to be brought before me, and commanded him, on pain of death if he divulged our secret, to acknowledge Firouz as his son. This precaution seemed to reassure the young prince. He multiplied his marks of affection for me, and took more pains than ever to give me pleasure.

Friendship, as one may say, exercised upon me a humanising influence. I no longer shunned diversions and entertainments. Firouz shone in them, and was universally admired. His amenity and grace won golden opinions, in which I fully shared, so that I was not a little surprised to see him coming to me, one day, wild and furious. "King of Kharezme," said he, "why have you deceived me? If you were not prepared to love me, and me alone, you ought not to have accepted me as your friend. Send me back to the Mage, since the Princess Rondabah, who is instantly expected here, must, in the nature of things, take full possession of your heart!"

This extraordinary outburst seemed so out of place and unreasonable, that I assumed a very stern tone, and replied: "What excess of folly is this, Prince of Shirvan? How can my union with Princess Rondabah in any wise concern you? What is there in common between the affection I shall owe to my wife, and the affection I shall ever entertain for yourself?"

"Oh! it concerns me greatly," rejoined he. "It concerns me much that a woman, lovely and lovable, should also become your staunch friend! Is it not said that the Princess of Ghilan unites to the fortitude, the courage of a man, all the charms of her sex? What more will you want when you possess her? Where shall I stand then? Perhaps you imagine you will have done all I am entitled to expect at your hands when you have reinstated me in my dominions; but I tell you beforehand that, if you placed the world's empire at my feet in exchange for your tenderest friendship, I could only regard you as my deadliest enemy!"

Firouz knew me better than I knew myself. He played upon me as he listed. Besides, he had himself well in hand, knew how to act so as to excite my sympathy, and to seem yielding and amenable, as it served his purpose. He quieted down after this outburst, and resumed his ordinary playfulness.

Though he passed for the son of a shepherd, Firouz, as being the son of the King of Shirvan, had a claim to my fullest consideration; and I would rather have been accused of a ridiculous partiality than that he should be treated without the deference due to his real rank. He occupied the pleasantest quarters in my palace. He had chosen his own attendants, in addition to two eunuchs, sent to him by the Mage on the very day of his arrival at my Persian pavilion. I had provided him with instructors in every kind of knowledge—whom he exasperated; with superb horses—which he rode to death; and with slaves—whom he ill-treated without mercy. But all this was hidden from me. My boundless partiality gave rise to some murmurs, no doubt, but it prevented any direct accusation from reaching my ears.

A venerable Mullah, highly esteemed for learning and piety, was commissioned to expound, for his benefit, the salutary moral teachings of the Koran, and caused him to read and learn by heart a variety of its sacred texts; and of all my young friend's tasks this was the most irksome. But I attributed his distaste to any cause but the real one. Far indeed was I from suspecting that his mind had already been saturated with doctrines altogether opposed to those of Islam.

One day that I had passed several hours without seeing my amiable pupil, I went to look for him, and found him in one of the large halls, capering and dancing about with a strange figure grotesquely huddled up in an ass's skin. "Ah, my dear prince," cried he, running up to me open-armed; "you have before you the very strangest spectacle in the world. My Mullah is transformed into an ass—the king of all asses, since he talks even as he talked before!"

"What do you mean?" cried I; "what game are you playing now?"

"It's not a game," replied the Mullah, waving two false ears of an immeasurable length; "I am trying, in all good nature, to fully realise the character I am now personating, and I entreat your Majesty not to be scandalised and take my so doing in evil part."

At these words I stood confounded. I misdoubted whether I was listening to the voice of the Mullah, or whether I really had before me a donkey, which, by some miracle, had been endowed with the gift of speech. Vainly did I ask Firouz for an explanation. He only laughed immoderately and replied, "Ask the donkey. Finally, my patience quite exhausted, I was about to order this disgusting buffoonery to be brought forcibly to an end, when Firouz assumed his most serious air, and said: "Sire, you will, I hope, forgive the innocent artifice by which I have endeavoured to demonstrate how much you, and other princes, are deceived as to the character of the people about them. This Mullah has, doubtless, been presented to you as a man of very superior merit; and, as such, you have appointed him to act as teacher to your friend and pupil. Well! be it known to you that, in order to obtain one of my most hideous negresses, with whom he is madly in love, he has consented to remain three days thus ridiculously accoutred, and so to be a universal laughing-stock. And, indeed, you must agree that he presents the form and figure of an ass in a highly satisfactory manner, and that his speech does no discredit to his outward seeming."

I asked the Mullah if what Firouz said was true.

"Not quite," he replied, stammering and stuttering in a pitifully absurd way; "the girl he is to give me, though black as night, is beautiful as day; the oil with which she makes her charms lustrous is scented like the orange-flower; her voice has the bitter-sweet of the pomegranate; when she toys with my beard, her fingers, which are prickly as the thistle, titillate my very heart! Ah! so that she may be mine, suffer me, suffer me to remain for three days in the form and figure of an ass!"

"Wretch, in that form and figure thou shalt die!" I cried, with an indignation I could not contain; "and let me never hear speak of thee again!"

I retired as I spoke these words, casting at Firouz looks of a kind to which he was in no way accustomed.

The rest of the day I spent in reflecting on Firouz's ill-nature, and the infamous conduct of the Mullah; but, when evening came, I thought only of again seeing my friend. I caused him to be summoned. He came at once, timidly and affectionately. "Dear prince," said he, "you don't know what grief I have felt all day at the thought that you seemed angry with me. In order to obtain forgiveness, I have lost not a moment in executing your commands. The ass is dead, and is buried. You will never hear speak of him again.

"This is another of your ill-timed jests," I exclaimed. "Do you ask me to believe that the Mullah, who spoke with such vigour this morning, is dead to-night?"

"He is, and by your command," replied Firouz. "One of my negro slaves, whose mistress he wished to appropriate, despatched him, and he was buried incontinently and without ceremony, like the donkey he was."

"This is really too much!" cried I. "What! do you think you can, with impunity, assassinate a man whose head you yourself had turned?"

"I executed your orders," he rejoined. "I executed them literally. Surely the loss of so vile a creature is not to be regretted. Farewell, I go to weep over my own imprudence, and the fragile nature of your affection—which any slightest jar can shatter."

He was about to retire. I stopped him. The most exquisite viands, delicately served in plates of enamel, were placed before us; we began to eat together, and I was again weak enough, during our repast, to laugh at all his jokes and jibes upon the subject of the ass.

The public did not take the Mullah's death with quite so much equanimity. It was said that Firouz, in derision of the faith of the true believers, had administered some philtre to the holy

man, causing him to lose his wits. An act so atrocious was naturally regarded with abhorrence, and I was accused of culpable partiality for a child of low birth and vile instincts. The queen, my mother, felt herself bound to bring these mutterings of discontent to my knowledge. She spoke of them openly, and in no ambiguous terms, before Firouz himself, so as to moderate his arrogance, if that were possible. For myself, I recognised the justice of her reproofs, which were at once affectionately expressed and reasonable; but my friend never forgave her.

He was specially outraged by the contempt heaped upon him because of his humble birth, and told me it was absolutely necessary his true parentage should be disclosed. I represented the danger involved, a danger that he had himself set before me in such strong terms, and entreated him to wait at least for the return of the envoys I had sent to Shirvan. But he was too impatient to wait, and, in order to overcome my objections, bethought himself of a device which I could certainly never have foreseen.

One morning when I was about to start on a hunting expedition, the Prince of Shirvan, who always gladly accompanied me on such occasions, feigned sickness. I wished to remain by him; but he urged me not to stay, assuring me that, with a little rest, I should find him, on my return, in a fit condition to share with me in such amusements as would be a pleasant relaxation after the fatigues of the day—amusements that he would himself devise.

Accordingly I did find, on my return, a superb collation, prepared and served in a little grove of trees, forming part of my gardens, and decked and illumined after a fashion all the prince's own in other words, with the utmost taste and refinement. We sat under a kind of dais formed of the intertwining branches of pomegranates and oleanders. A thousand flowers, shed at our feet, formed a rich carpet, and filled the sense with their intoxicating fragrance. Unnumbered crystal vases, containing fruits perfumed with ambergris, and floating on snow, reflected the light of small tapers daintily set on the margin of a succession of fountains. Choirs of young musicians were so disposed as to charm the ear without interrupting our discourse. Never was eve more delicious; never had Firouz shown himself more gay, more amiable, more enchanting. His pleasant mirth, his wit, enlivened me even more than the wine, which he poured out freely. When the wily son of Filanshaw perceived that my head was in a whirl of pleasant excitement, he knelt before me on one knee, and, taking both my hands in his, said: "Dear Alasi, I had forgotten to ask you to forgive a wretch who has deserved death."

"Speak," I replied. "You know that from me you have but to ask in order to obtain; and, besides, I should be pleased indeed to find your heart sensible to pity."

"The matter stands thus," rejoined Firouz. "I was to-day in my apartment, surrounded by your flatterers, who at once hate me and seek to win my favour, when the shepherd, my supposed father, came in to kiss me, open-armed. At that moment the blood of Filanshaw surged rebellious in my heart. 'Hence, churl,' said I to the shepherd, 'go and stifle thy misbegotten brats with thy clumsy caresses! Wouldst thou have the unblushing effrontery to maintain that I am thy son?' 'That I am bound to do so, you very well know,' he replied firmly. 'I will maintain it with my life.' This reply of his was, no doubt, in strict accordance with his duty; but, curious to see how far we can really depend on those to whom we entrust our secrets, I ordered the man, who seemed so resolute, to receive the bastinado. He endured it but a very short time—he revealed all. After your express orders, and the punishment with which you threatened him, he is no doubt worthy of death; but I pray you to forgive him."

"The ordeal was severe," said I. "Will you ever be cruel? What irresistible power compels me to love you? Assuredly not the sympathy of fellow-feeling."

“It is most true,” he rejoined, “that I do not endure mankind as patiently as you do. To me men seem as ravenous as wolves, as perfidious as the foxes in Loqman’s Fables, and so flighty of feeling, so false to their promises, that it is impossible not to hold them in abhorrence! Why are we two not alone in the world? Then the earth, now swarming with the vile and wicked, might boast itself inhabited by two faithful and happy friends.”

By such exalted and romantic outbursts of sentiment, Firouz brought me to tolerate this new proof of the essential badness of his heart. He had, indeed, not told me the whole story, as I learned on the morrow. It was by his own orders, and at his own suggestion, indirectly conveyed, that the shepherd had come into his presence, and accosted him as he had done; and, moreover, the poor wretch had had the fortitude to endure his punishment almost unto death before infringing my commands. I sent the unhappy creature a sum of money, and held myself most to blame for his condition.

As this transaction had filled all Zerbend with indignation, and seemed to reflect more blame on Firouz than he actually deserved, I publicly, and with some pomp, declared his real birth, and the reasons why it had been hidden. I also thenceforward surrounded him with regal state; and was not a little surprised to see that those who had hitherto been most bitter against him were now all eagerness to do him service. This made me somewhat mistrust their real intentions. But the Prince of Shirvan reassured me. “Don’t be afraid,” said he, laughing; “you can trust the care of my person to these people just as safely as to their fellows; there is nothing that really savours of treachery in their bearing; their affection has only changed with the change in my fortunes. I am now no longer the sly and cruel little shepherd lad, who, for his evil pranks, was sure sooner or later to be sent back to his hovel. I am a great prince, good and humane of disposition, from whom a thousand benefits may be expected. I am ready to wager that I could have the heads of five or six of them cut off daily, by lot, and that the rest, trusting to be more fortunate than their companions, would continue to sing my praises.”

Such speeches—and I knew only too well how true they were!—served insensibly to harden my heart. It is a great evil to look upon mankind with a too clear vision. You seem to be living among wild beasts, and you become a wild beast yourself.

I had thought at first that, in his new position, the Prince of Shirvan would yield, even more freely than he had done before, to his evil bent; but in this I was mistaken. He showed himself noble in manner and sensible in conduct, and his bearing towards great and small was affable and obliging. In short, he completely obliterated the bad impression produced by his former practices.

These days of quiet lasted till the arrival of Rondabah. I happened to be in Firouz’s apartments when news was brought that that princess, attended by a retinue suitable to her rank, was only at a few parasangs’ distance from Zerbend. Startled, I scarce knew why, I turned my eyes on my friend. His condition makes me tremble even yet, as I think of it. A deathly pallor overspread his countenance, his movements became convulsive, and at last he fell to the ground, senseless. I was about to bear him to his couch, when the Mage’s two eunuchs took him from my arms, saying: “Leave him to our care, lord—and deign to retire. If, on recovering his senses, he were to see you at his side, he would instantly expire.”

These words, and the tone in which they were uttered, impressed me so much that I could scarcely drag myself through the portal of the apartment. Once outside, I awaited the issue with anguish unspeakable. At last one of the eunuchs came out and begged me to reenter. Firouz, leaning on the arm of the other eunuch, advanced to meet me with halt and trembling steps. I made him sit down on the divan, and, seating myself by his side, I said: “Friend of my soul, Fate

alone can be answerable for the strange and unaccountable feelings of our hearts. You are, against all comprehension, jealous of Rondabah; and I, notwithstanding the engagements into which my ambassadors have entered, am ready to risk all rather than plunge you into a sea of sorrows!”

“Nay, let us go and see this redoubtable heroine,” replied Firouz; “suffer me only to accompany you in this your first interview; at my age my presence cannot be open to objection. If you leave me here alone, I shall die before you return.”

To this I had nothing to reply. The fascination he exercised upon me was extraordinary, to myself quite inexplicable. And I could but agree to his every wish. He resumed his ordinary spirits, and continued to repeat, as we went along: “Ah! if only this accursed princess should prove not to be beautiful!”

She was beautiful, however; but of a beauty that inspired awe rather than excited desire; very tall, of majestic port, her whole aspect proud and austere. Her hair, black as ebony, enhanced the whiteness of her complexion, and her eyes, of the same dark hue, looked command but did not softly allure. Her mouth, though graceful in its lines, had no inviting smile, and when her coral lips opened, the words were words of sense indeed, but very rarely moving and persuasive.

Stung, as it seemed, by my want of a lover’s ardour, and offended because, contrary to all use and custom, I had come accompanied by my friend, Rondabah no sooner perceived us advancing than she turned to my mother and said: “Which of these two princes is the one to whom I am destined?”

“To both, if you please,” replied Firouz unhesitatingly and mockingly, so that I almost burst out laughing. I restrained myself, however, with an effort, and was preparing to find some excuse for my friend’s ill manners, when the Princess of Ghilan, after looking me over attentively from head to foot, and casting a disdainful glance at Firouz, remarked—always addressing herself to the queen: “Those who allow an insult to pass unnoticed deserve to be insulted; farewell, madam. And you, Kali,” continued she, turning to the chief of her eunuchs, “make all the necessary preparations for my return to Ghilan this very night.” Saying these words she retired, and the queen was not slow to follow her, only stopping to threaten us with all the calamities that must ensue from the offence given to Rondabah. But we were at that moment in no humour to listen. As soon as we found ourselves alone, we burst out laughing at the scene which had just taken place. “Is that a woman?” asked Firouz. “No, it is the ghost of Roostum, or of Lalzer—or may we not rather say that the spirit of some famous warrior, Rondabah’s ancestor, has taken possession of that tall and stately form, which we are asked to look upon as hers? Ah! my dear Alasi, sharpen your sword, prepare to defend your life if you do not in all things exactly conform to the ceremonial enjoined by the all-powerful Kali, with his voice of silver.”

We remained in this mood till the queen interrupted us. She had nearly appeased Rondabah, and wished me to complete her task. Her representations, dictated by all a mother’s love, were strong and urgent, and I yielded to them.

On the day preceding that fixed for the marriage ceremonies, I rose earlier than usual. Anxious, agitated, I went down alone into the large gardens containing the funereal monuments of my ancestors. I wandered through the most sombre alleys, and entered at last into a grotto, through which ran a stream of water. The darkness was such in the grotto’s deeper recesses that scarce a feeble ray of light could be discerned. I penetrated into the blackest shade, so as to be able to dream unseen and undisturbed. Soon, to my surprise, I saw a figure approaching that bore, in form and attire, a close resemblance to Amru, the son of my vizier. He went and seated himself in a part of the grotto where a little light was shining, so that I could see him while he could not

see me. I spoke not a word, but saw with surprise another mysterious personage approaching, out of the very heart of the darkness; and this figure bore the likeness of Rondabah's chief eunuch. The second personage accosted the first, and I seemed to hear him say: "Son of Ilbars, too charming Amru, let your heart rejoice; it shall possess the object of its desire! Rondabah, my mistress, will come here this very night. The first of her love-vows will be yours. Only the aftermath will be given to the King of Kharezme to-morrow." Amru kissed the ground in token of submission, and murmured a few low words whose meaning was lost in the sound of the running water. They then left the grotto.

I was about to follow, and wash out the affront in blood; but a moment's reflection arrested this first impulse. I had no love for Rondabah. I was only marrying her for reasons of state, and out of pity. That there should be anything in what had passed to make me really unhappy was out of the question. I had only to bring her criminal perfidy into full light, and I should be quit of her, and recover my own freedom with all honour. These thoughts passed swiftly through my brain. I thanked whatever lucky star had led me in time to this important discovery, and ran to impart it to Firouz. What was my dismay when, on entering his apartment, I found him in the arms of his two eunuchs, who were holding his hands and weeping and crying:

"O master, loved master! What harm had your beautiful locks done? Why have you ruthlessly cut them off? And now you would gash your lovely white forehead! No, not if we die to stay your hands!"

This sight so moved me that I could not utter a single word. My speechless anguish seemed to quiet Firouz. He tore himself from the arms of his eunuchs, and, running to me and embracing me, exclaimed: "Calm yourself, generous Alasi! Is it my condition that troubles you? Surely it should cause you no surprise; but forget that you have seen me thus; notwithstanding these tears, this hair that I have given to the flames, notwithstanding the despair to which you saw me reduced, I wish you every happiness with Rondabah—yes, though it should cost me my life!"

"Ah," cried I, "perish a thousand Rondabahs if your nerves, so delicately strung, could thus be spared these terrible shocks and jars—yes, perish a thousand Rondabahs, one and all, even if they were as true as our Rondabah is false!"

"What!" cried Firouz in turn, "have I heard aright? Are you speaking of the Princess of Ghilan? For pity's sake explain yourself."

I then told him all that had happened in the grotto, and my determination to blaze abroad to all men the shame of Rondabah. He fully approved my design, and made no effort to hide his joy at the course things were taking. "I congratulate you," said he, adding in a whisper: "It has cost me my hair, but you have had a lucky escape."

We resolved not to reveal our secret to the queen, my mother, until the time came for taking her with us to surprise Rondabah.

The queen seemed more astonished than grieved when we went to her apartment and told her what had brought us thither so late. The affection she had at first shown for Rondabah had gradually cooled as mine had appeared to increase. Nevertheless, she had not been able to help respecting her, and never ceased, while following us, to express amazement at her shameless conduct. Firouz, on his part, laughed, and for more reasons than one.

We went down into the garden. A faithful slave, whom I had set to watch the place, came and told us that the two culprits had been in the grotto for some minutes. Immediately we entered, with torches, and in such numbers that those whom we thus surprised must, as one would have thought, fall dead for very shame. They seemed, however, in no wise disconcerted. I drew my



sword in a fury and thought, with one blow, to send their two wretched heads rolling on to the ground; but my sword clove the empty air alone: they vanished from my sight!

At this moment of confusion a cry arose: "The Princess of Ghilan has forced the guard at the entrance to the grotto!" And she appeared before us. "King of Kharezme," she said in clear tones, modest but unabashed, "I am advised that a plot is being hatched in this place against my honour; and I am come to confound my enemies. What is going on here?"

"Fly, wretched creature," said the queen, "or my son will repeat the blow you have just evaded by your magic arts."

"I do not fear death," replied Rondabah quietly. "Alasi has made no attempt upon my life. If you have been misled by some seeming prodigy, I ask you to tell me what was its nature. I rely on the help that Heaven always extends to innocence, and have no doubt as to my ability to undeceive you."

Rondabah's proud and noble bearing, her looks, that commanded respect, all served to confound me. I almost doubted the evidence of my eyes and ears, when Firouz exclaimed: "Oh! we must indeed confess that the Princess of Ghilan's memory is of the shortest! We find her in the arms of her beloved Amru; she disappears with her favourite, and when, within a moment, it pleases her to reappear on the scene, she has entirely forgotten all that has taken place."

At these words Rondabah changed colour. The flush died on her cheeks, and left them deadly pale. She turned upon me eyes that were full of tears. "Oh, most unhappy prince!" she said, "I now see the full depth of the abyss yawning at thy feet. The monster dragging thee thitherward will not fail of his prey! The spirits of darkness are at his beck and call. I cannot save thee, and yet I shudder at abandoning thee to thy fate. Thou hast covered me with infamy, but it is thy ruin only that wrings my heart!" Having thus spoken, Rondabah retired with majestic steps, none daring to stay her.

We stood as if turned to stone, and looked fixedly at one another, unable to speak. "Surely we must all have lost our wits," cried the queen at last. "What! the cool effrontery of an unworthy magician would make us disbelieve the evidence of our eyes and ears! Let her go, and deliver us for ever from her hateful presence! Nothing could happen better!" I agreed, and Firouz, who seemed confused and frightened, most assuredly was of no other opinion. We each went towards our own apartments.

I left the place so troubled that I did not see Firouz was following close at my heels, nor could I altogether repress a feeling of horror when I found we were alone together. But ah! when the heart is evil, all presentiments are sent to us in vain!

Firouz threw himself impetuously at my feet, and said, sobbing: "Why, why, O King of Kharezme, did you give me shelter? Why did you not leave me to die with my father? I was then but a child; no one could have accused me of being a magician. Is it at this court of yours, and here by your side, that I have learned the art of conjuring up the Dives? And yet Rondabah, the wicked Rondabah, has almost persuaded you. Will she not also say I have gained your friendship by some evil charm? Alas! you know well enough that the only charm I have used is to cherish you a hundred times more than my own life!"

But why dwell upon this scene? All of you must foresee its inevitable end. Firouz succeeded in dissipating my suspicions. Like the Calif Vathek, I had heard the voice of a beneficent spirit, and, like him, I had hardened my heart against its saving influence. Rondabah's words were forgotten; I disregarded the confused doubts they had aroused in my mind. The Prince of Shirvan became more dear to me than ever. That moment was the turning-point in my life. It sealed my ruin.

We heard on the following morning that Rondabah had departed during the night, with all her retinue. I ordered public rejoicings.

A few days afterwards Firouz said to me, before the queen, my mother: "You must see, King of Kharezme, that war with the King of Ghilan is now inevitable. His daughter, with her wiles, will easily persuade him that she is innocent, and he will want to avenge her wrongs. Forestall him; raise an army; invade Ghilan, and ravage the country: you are the aggrieved party!"

The queen agreed with Firouz, and I assented. Nevertheless, I watched the war preparations with regret. I thought the war a just war, and yet was troubled in conscience as though it had been unjust. Moreover, the qualms I felt with regard to my extreme attachment to Firouz grew stronger day by day. The son of Filanshaw had learned to read in my heart very clearly, and was in no wise deceived by the pretexts I put forward for my misgivings, and involuntary fits of perplexity; but he made as though he accepted my explanations, and took occasion of my perturbed state to devise new pleasures and forms of distraction.

One morning, as we were starting on a great hunting expedition, we found, in the palace yard, a man who bore a heavy chest, and was disputing with the guards. I inquired what was the matter. "It is a jeweller from Mossul," replied the chief of the eunuchs. "He says he has certain gems of the utmost rarity; but he is importunate, and refuses to await your Majesty's leisure."

"He is quite right," said Firouz; "nothing that pleases and amuses can ever come amiss; let us go back and examine these wonders. The beasts of the forest are doubtless prepared to await our pleasure."

We retraced our steps accordingly, and the jeweller unclasped his chest. Nothing in it seemed worthy of our curiosity, till my eyes fell on a golden casket, round which were engraved these words: "PORTRAIT OF THE FAIREST AND MOST UNHAPPY PRINCESS IN THE WORLD." "Let us look at her," exclaimed Firouz. "The portrait of this beauty, doubtless in tears, will appeal to our hearts. It is good, now and again, to be moved to pity."

I opened the casket and was struck mute with astonishment. "What are you looking at in that way?" asked my friend. He looked in turn, was moved to indignation, and, turning to the eunuchs, exclaimed:

"Lay hands upon this insolent merchant, and throw him, his chest, and all his wares into the river! What! Shall a wretch like this disclose to the whole world the face of Filanshaw's daughter—the rosebud that I pictured to myself sheltered from every evil wind beneath the humble roof of adversity?"

"Heavens!" I exclaimed in turn; "what do I behold? What do I hear? Let no one touch this man! And thou, friend of my soul, speak! Is this indeed thy sister—thy sister, featured like thyself?"

"Yes, King of Kharezme," replied the Prince of Shirvan; "you have here indeed the portrait of my twin sister, Firouzkah. The queen, my mother, saved her, with myself, from the fury of the rebels. When they separated us, and handed me over to the charge of the Mage, I was told that she would be hidden in some place of safety. But I now see only too clearly that I was deceived."

"My lord," then said the merchant, "the queen, your mother, has taken refuge with her daughter in a house of mine, near Mossul. It is by her orders that I carry this portrait through the divers countries of Asia, in the hope that Firouzkah's beauty will rouse the beholders to avenge the wrongs done to the king, your father. I have already travelled through various lands, and not without success; but the queen never told me I should find you here."

“Doubtless she knew it not,” said Firouz, “and thought I was still with the Mage. But,” he continued, turning towards me, “you are pale, dear friend; let us regain your apartments, and put off our hunting to another day.”

I let him lead me in, and, having first cast myself down on a divan, did not cease to look at the portrait. “Oh, my dear Firouz,” I cried, “these eyes, this mouth, all these features are thine. The hair, indeed, is not quite like thine, and I would it were; but this has taken the colour of camphire, while thine has the colour of musk.”

“What!” said Firouz, laughing, “a pale cold picture can thus inflame with love a heart that resisted all the fire of Rondabah’s charms! But calm yourself, my dear Alasi,” continued he, more seriously; “the wife of Filanshaw will yet call you her son. I purpose sending the jewel-merchant back to her. He will tell her, from me, to accept no help of any prince save yourself—that it is you, my benefactor, my friend, who are the destined avenger of her wrongs. But let us first make haste to punish the Princess of Ghilan for the indignities she has heaped upon you. Let us anticipate the fury of her attack. How can you reconquer my kingdom while your own is in jeopardy?”

From the moment that my passion seemed to myself intelligible and normal, my heart regained its calm. Peace reigned in my breast. I gave strict orders that the preparations for our enterprise should be hastened, and very soon, with a numerous host, we were marching against the enemy.

The frontiers of Ghilan were undefended. We ravaged the march country without mercy. But Firouz’s strength did not equal his courage. I spared him as much as possible, even at the risk of giving the enemy time to complete the full equipment of his forces.

One day that I had called a halt, in a valley clothed with fresh moss, and watered by a clear stream, we saw tripping by, not far from us, a doe whiter than milk. Immediately Firouz caught up his bow, and sent an arrow flying after the innocent creature. The shaft went home; the doe fell; we ran to the spot. A peasant, perceiving us, cried: “What have you done? You have killed the holy woman’s doe!” This exclamation seemed to amuse Firouz. But his mirth was of short duration. An enormous dog, the doe’s companion, leapt upon him, dragged him to the ground, held him pinned down with heavy paws, and seemed to be only waiting some master’s orders before putting its fangs through his throat. I dared neither to speak nor attack the dog, for fear of enraging it the more; nor could I attempt to shear off its head: the heads were too close to one another. At last, when I own I was almost terrified to death, I saw approaching a woman, veiled, who forced the dog to relinquish its hold, and then, turning to me, said: “I did not think, King of Kharezme, to find you here, in a place where I had come to bury myself alive. I have just, according to the divine precept, returned good for evil, in saving the life of Firouz. Do not you, on your part, return evil for good by destroying this people, who, far from seeking to avenge my wrongs, are quite ignorant of the indignities heaped upon me.”

As she finished speaking these words she lifted her veil, and disclosed the majestic countenance of Rondabah. Then she turned on her heel, and retired with quick steps, leaving us in a state of inexpressible surprise.

Firouz was the first to recover. “Well,” said he, “do you still entertain any doubt as to Rondabah’s dealing in magic? What shall we do to protect ourselves against her arts? I know but one remedy: let us surprise her this very night; let us take a band of our trusty followers, and burn her alive in her retreat—which we can easily discover by skilful inquiry; or else we may resign ourselves to being torn to pieces by the Afrites, who serve her in the shape of savage beasts.”

“Shame!” cried I. “Would you thus repay the service she has just done us? Whatever she may be, she has this moment saved you from a cruel death.”

“Too credulous prince,” rejoined Firouz, “do you not see that the infamous sorceress defers her vengeance, that she is only fearful of losing its full fruition by undue haste? But what am I saying? I only am the object of her malignity; nor would I wish it otherwise. I only hope that, after my death, she will spare your life and be satisfied with making you her slave!”

This speech produced its desired effect. I was not master of my own judgment when Firouz opened out a glimpse of danger to himself. I became as eager as even he could wish, in the execution of his black and horrible design. The flames that consumed Rondabah’s rustic dwelling were kindled by my hands as well as his; and, notwithstanding the resistance of the peasantry—whom we slaughtered without mercy as a reward for their generous efforts on her behalf—we did not leave the spot till we had left Rondabah buried, as we believed, beneath a heap of smoking ashes.

A few days afterwards I wished to advance, with my army, into the interior of the country; but soon found my way blocked by the enemy’s forces, under the command of the King of Ghilan and his son. It became necessary to offer battle. Firouz, notwithstanding all I could urge, insisted on fighting by my side. This did not add to the effectiveness of my arms. I thought less of attacking the foe than of parrying the blows aimed at my friend. He, on his side, threw himself in the way of those directed against myself. Neither suffered his sight to be diverted from the other. No one could doubt, seeing us, that each, in defending the other’s life, was defending a life dearer than his own.

The prince of Ghilan had sought me out everywhere. We met at last, and, swooping on me with uplifted sword, he cried: “King of Kharezme, thy life shall pay forfeit for the atrocious wrongs done to my sister; had I known of them before, I should have sought thee out in thy very palace, and maugre all the spirits of darkness that dwell there!”

Scarcely had he spoken these words than the hand that held the avenging sword fell to the ground, struck off at the wrist by a back-handed blow from the blade of Firouz. The King of Ghilan hastened up, foaming with rage, and aimed at us two crashing blows. I avoided the one; the other went home on Firouz’s shoulder. I saw him reel in his saddle. To send the old king’s head flying in the air, to take Firouz on to my own horse, to spur out of the battle—all this was but the work of a moment.

The son of Filanshaw had lost consciousness. I was scarcely in better plight. Instead of returning to my camp, I plunged into a forest, deep and gloomy, where I did nothing but wander, almost aimlessly, like one bereft of reason. Fortunately a woodman saw us. He approached and said: “If you have not altogether lost your wits, and have no wish to see this young man die in your arms, follow me to my father’s cabin, where you can get help.”

I suffered him to lead me. The old man received us kindly. He caused Firouz to be placed on a bed, ran to fetch an elixir, and made him drink of it; and then said: “But a moment more, and this young man would have been dead. He has nearly lost all his blood. The first thing to be done was to repair that loss. Now we will examine his wound; and, while my son goes into the forest to find some simples that I shall require, you must help me to undress your friend.”

I was doing this mechanically, and with a trembling hand; but came to myself with a start when, on opening Firouz’s vest, I saw a breast which the houris might have envied. “Why, it’s a woman!” said the old man.

“Now Allah be praised!” cried I, in a delirium of surprise and joy; “but what of her wound?”

“That is of no great consequence,” replied the good man, examining it, “and when I have bound up the gash, she will soon come to her senses. Compose yourself, therefore, young man,” continued he, “and be specially careful not to disturb the rest of one to whom, as I well perceive, you are passionately attached. Any emotion, at the present moment, would cause her to die before your eyes.”

The transport of love and joy that filled my soul here gave place to the apprehension caused by the old man’s words. I helped him in silence to perform his kindly offices; and then, having enveloped the inanimate form of Firouzkah—for she it was—in a coverlet of leopard-skin, I waited, in mortal anxiety, till she should open her eyes.

The hope held out to me by the old man was soon realised. My well-beloved gave a sigh, turned her languishing eyes upon me, and said: “Where are we, friend? Is the battle lost, and are we . . . ?”

“No, no!” I interrupted, placing my hand on her mouth; “all is gained since your precious life is safe! But keep still; you don’t know how much depends upon your silence.”

Firouzkah did not fail to understand the full meaning of my words. She spoke no more, and soon, from very weakness, fell into a deep sleep.

The old man watched her, well pleased; while my own breathing seemed to repeat every rise and fall of her breast, on which I had softly placed my hand. She slept for two hours, and never woke till the woodman entered abruptly into the hut. He did not bring with him the herbs for which his father had sent him, at which I expressed surprise. But Firouzkah, now restored by her slumbers, interrupted me, and said: “Thou hast news to tell us, hast thou not?”

“Yes, yes,” said he, “and the very best of news, The army of the Kharezmians has been cut to pieces, and their camp pillaged. The victory would be complete if they could only catch those wicked princes, Alasi and Firouz, who have escaped, after killing the king and his son. But the princess Rondabah has ascended the throne, and is causing search to be made for them everywhere. She offers such great rewards that they must soon be captured.”

“I am delighted at what you tell me,” cried Firouzkah, without suffering any change to appear in her countenance; “we had been assured that Rondabah was burned to death in her woodland dwelling; and I had been most grieved to hear it, as I knew she was a most excellent princess.

“She is even better than you think,” replied the woodman, with a cunning look; “and that is why Heaven has kept her from harm. The prince, her brother, chanced upon her retreat, and took her away some hours before the perpetration of that wicked crime—a crime which, please God, will not long remain unpunished.”

The clod’s tone sufficiently showed that he took us for what we really were; and he made signs to his father to follow him out of the room. They went out together. Afar we heard the trampling of many horses. Firouzkah immediately rose to a sitting posture, and, presenting me with a razor, which she took from under her dress, said in a whisper: “You see, dear Alasi, the danger we are in; cut off my hair, which, as you see, is growing again, and throw it into those flames. Don’t answer a word. If you lose a moment it is all up with us!”

I could but comply with such a pressing command; and I did so. A few seconds later, a Dive, shaped like an Ethiopian, appeared before our eyes, and asked Firouzkah what she wanted with him. “I desire thee,” she replied, “to carry me this very instant, with my friend, to the cavern of the Mage, thy master; and, as thou passest, to crush the two worthless wretches who are bargaining over our lives!”

The Dive needed no second orders. He took us both in his arms, sprang from the hut—causing it, with one kick, to fall on our late hosts, and then shot through the air so rapidly that I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself I was in the arms of Firouzkah, and saw only her charming face, lovingly near my own. I softly closed my eyelids again, as one does when wishing to prolong a pleasant dream; but soon I felt my happiness was real. “O wicked Firouz, O cruel Firouz!” I cried. “What needless torments have you caused me to endure!” Uttering these words, I pressed again and yet again, with burning kisses, those sweet and beautiful lips, that had themselves pressed mine while I lay entranced, and that now seemed to elude my own; when, suddenly recollecting my well-beloved’s wound, I gave her time—at once to breathe, and to answer my anxious questions.

“There is no need for anxiety, dear Alasi,” she answered, “I am perfectly healed, and all will shortly be explained to you. But lift up your head, and look around.”

I obeyed, and thought myself transported beneath a new firmament, encrusted with stars a thousand times more brilliant and nearer to us than the stars in the natural world. I looked round on every side, and it seemed to me I was in a vast plain, and that round it were transparent clouds, which held enfolded, not only ourselves, but all the most beautiful and delicious products of the earth. “Ah!” cried I, after a moment of surprise, and embracing Firouzkah, “what is it to us if we have been carried into Cheheristan itself? The true realms of bliss are in thine arms!”

“This is not Cheheristan,” replied the daughter of Filanshaw. “It is only the Mage’s cave, which an infinite number of Beings, superior to our race, take pleasure in decorating with a varied beauty. But such as it is, and whatever may be its inhabitants, everything will be done here to anticipate your wishes. “Is it not so, my Father?” continued she, raising her voice.

“Undoubtedly,” replied the Mage, appearing suddenly before our eyes, and advancing towards me with a smile. “Prince Alasi will be treated here as he has treated my dear Firouzkah; and, moreover, the priceless jewel I confided to his care—Firouzkah herself—shall be his to possess for ever, if such be his desire. Come, let the marriage feast be at once prepared, and all things made ready for so great an event!”

He had no sooner spoken these words, than the cavern again changed its aspect. It assumed an oval shape, and diminished proportions, and appeared all encrusted with pale sapphires. Round us, on divans, were ranged boy and girl musicians, who charmed our ears with melodious strains, while from their heads, light-encircled, shone rays more pure and soft than would be shed by a thousand tapers.

We were placed at a table covered with excellent dainties and the most exquisite wines, and were served delightfully by Persian boys and by Georgian girls—all as white and graceful as the jasmine sprays engarlanding their fair heads. With their every motion the gauze robes, that half clothed half revealed them, exhaled the sweetest perfumes of Araby the Blest. Firouzkah, who could not at once forget her part as Firouz, sported with these children as they filled our cups, and indulged in a thousand pleasant pranks.

When the repast was ended, the Mage, first ordering the most profound silence, and addressing himself to me, spoke as follows:—

“You are doubtless surprised, King of Kharezme, that, with the power I possess, I should have taken the trouble to seek you out and obtain your protection for the girl-treasure committed to my charge. You must understand just as little why Firouzkah should have gone to you disguised, and have left you to the mercy of love-feelings, incomprehensible to yourself, which she might so easily have explained.

“Be it known to you, then, that the people of Shirvan, always a rebellious race, and inclined to murmur against their rulers, had begun to grumble because Filanshaw had no children. But when at last the queen, his wife, bid fair to become a mother, their insolence passed all bounds. ‘She must have a son!’ they cried round the royal dwelling; ‘we will have no princess to place us under the yoke of some stranger prince. She must have a son!’

“The poor queen suffered quite enough discomfort from her condition without the disquiet of such alarming cries. She pined visibly. Filanshaw came to consult me. ‘You must deceive these blockheads,’ said I. ‘Even that is much more than they deserve. If the queen has a daughter, pretend the daughter is a boy, and, in order that you may not be compelled to entrust the secret to her nurses, send the child here. My wife, Soudabé, will bring her up with a mother’s care and affection, and, when the time comes, I myself will spare no pains in her education.’ My proposal saved the queen’s life. Firouzkah came into the world, and we called her Firouz. Under that name her birth was hailed with public rejoicings; and Soudabé, who received her from the king’s hands, brought her to my cavern—from whence she was taken, from time to time, to show herself at court.

“We gave her the double education which, in view of all eventualities, it seemed desirable that she should have.

“She accepted Soudabé’s instructions and mine, with an equal zest, and would seek relaxation, after her studies, in the company of the Dives, of every form, who haunt my cavern.

“These active spirits were so attached to Firouzkah that there was no whim of hers they were not ready to gratify. Some taught her such exercises as are common to either sex. Others kept her amused with pleasant games, or told her marvellous stories. A great number went the world over to find her rare and curious things, or interesting news. She never found time hang at all heavy on her hands, and always came back to my cavern with transports of delight whenever she had been obliged to pass a few days at, Samakhié.

“The Princess of Shirvan had just reached the age of fourteen, when the Dive Ghulfaquair, being maliciously inclined, brought her your portrait. From that moment she seemed to lose her natural gaiety of spirits, did nothing but dream and sigh, and, as may be supposed, gave us great anxiety. The cause of her pain she carefully concealed, and the Dive took care to keep us in like ignorance. He was, moreover, pretty busy in following your movements, so as to be able to give her a report of all your doings. What he told her of your shyness, your insensibility to love, only served to further excite her passion. She burned with the desire of taming your mood, and bringing you under the sway of her charms; and soon the course of events was such as to add, to that desire, hope. The open rebellion of the people of Shirvan, Filanshaw’s entreaties that I should so dispose of his daughter as to protect her from their fury, all conspired to embolden Firouzkah, and she spoke to me with entire freedom.

“ ‘You, who have been a father to me,’ she said; ‘you, who have taught me not to be ashamed of the passions Nature has implanted in us, you will understand when I say that I love the Prince Alasi, King of Kharezme, and that I intend—however hard the task—to win his love in return. It is now no longer a question of hiding my sex so that I may reign over a people who have destroyed all my family, and whom I must ever hold in abhorrence. I shall now use my disguise in order to insinuate myself into a heart which soon, I hope, will be altogether mine. Alasi is insensible to woman’s charm. It is in the guise of friendship that I must make him feel woman’s power. Take me to him; ask him to protect me as the son of the King of Shirvan. He is too generous to refuse; and I shall owe to you a happiness without which life would be hateful!’

“I felt no surprise on hearing Firouzkah speak in this way. She was a woman; she wanted a husband; what could be more natural? I contented myself, therefore, with questioning her as to how she had become acquainted with you. She told me all, and spoke of you in such terms that I soon perceived any opposition would only make her unhappy. So I said, ‘I will take you to the King of Kharezme, under the name of Firouz. because I feel I can rely on your prudence, and the strength of mind I know you to possess. You will need both; for by my magic arts I have discovered that you have a powerful rival, whose triumph would be your eternal despair. When, however, you are so pressed as to stand in need of supernatural help, burn your hair, and my Dives will instantly attend to receive your commands.’ The rest, King of Kharezme, is known to you, continued the Mage. “Firouz has laboured hard in the cause of Firouzkah: *he* has won your heart by his gaiety, his light sportiveness; *she* must keep it by her love, and the prudence from which she has never deviated, even amidst dangers that would have daunted the courage of most women.

“Oh!” cried the Princess of Shirvan, “I ran great risk of losing the heart it had cost me so much to gain—and I should have lost at least a part of it if I had not, at the sacrifice of my beautiful locks, called up the helpful Dives who so effectually impersonated Rondabah, Amru, and Kali! What do you say, Alasi?”

“That I shall ever cherish the motives that induced you to commit that act of injustice,” I replied, with diplomacy, and some misgiving.

“My daughter,” said the Mage, “the word ‘injustice,’ which Prince Alasi has just uttered, can only apply to your suggested doubt as to his constancy. For he must be aware that every being has the right, by all possible means, to remove hurtful objects from its path, and that the motives of anger or fear which impel us so to act are born of the living and self-preserving forces of Nature. But the hours are fleeting fast. It is time you should enjoy the happier fruits of your frequent sorrows. Receive, King of Kharezme, the Princess Firouzkah at my hand; lead her to the nuptial chamber, and may you there be endowed with a full share of the life-giving fire which the earth contains in her bosom, the same fire that nightly rekindles the starry torches of the sky!”

We stood in no need of the Mage’s good wishes; the feelings that glowed in our hearts were all-sufficient for our happiness. Friendship, love—their transports were alternate, and commingled in an unutterable ecstasy.

Firouzkah had no desire for sleep, and related to me how, in a moment, the Mage had healed her wound. She vaunted his power, and advised that I should ask him to show me his Hall of Fire, confessing that she herself had been brought up in the religion of Zoroaster, and considered it the most natural and rational of all religions. “Think, then,” she added, “if I could ever have taken delight in the absurdities of the Koran. Would that all your Mussulman doctors had shared the fate of the Mullah whose discourses wearied me to death! That moment was indeed delicious when I induced him to put on the outward seeming of an ass. I should have taken a like pleasure in plucking out all the feathers from the wings of the Angel Gabriel, and thus punishing him for having furnished a pen to the man who wrote therewith so much nonsense,—if indeed I had been simpleton enough to believe that absurd story.”

There was a time when such words would have seemed to me unspeakable for very wickedness; and in good sooth I did not like them much then. But any remaining scruples formed but a weak defence against the alluring caresses with which Firouzkah accompanied her every word.

A voluptuous sleep enveloped us at last; and we did not wake till the lively song of birds proclaimed broad day.



Surprised by sounds which I had no reason to expect in such a place, I ran to the grotto's entrance, and found it led to a garden containing all that is most delightful in nature, while the encircling sea enhanced the beauties which the earth exhibited to our gaze.

"Is this another illusion?" I asked, "for this, at least, cannot be part of the Mage's cavern?"

"It is one of its issues," replied Firouzkah; "but it would take you more than one day to explore all the beauties of the place. The Mage says that everything has been made for man's use, and that man must possess himself of everything he wants whenever the opportunity offers. He has spent part of his life in acquiring his power, and is spending the remainder in enjoying its fruits."

I did not fail to express to the Mage a very strong desire to see his Hall of Fire. "It will please you," said he, with a satisfied air; "but I cannot conduct you thither until you have visited my baths, and been invested with robes suitable to the majesty of the place."

To please Firouzkah I consented to everything that was demanded of me; and, for fear of offending her, I even refrained from laughter at the grotesque robes in which we were both ridiculously accoutred. But what were my feelings, on entering the Hall of Fire? Never has spectacle so filled me with surprise and terror—never, until overwhelmed by the sight that met my eyes on entering the fatal place in which we now are!

The fire that the Mage worshipped seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth and to soar above the clouds. The flames sometimes shone with an unendurable brightness; sometimes they shed a blue and lurid light, making all surrounding objects appear even more hideous than they actually were. The rails of glowing brass that separated us from this dread deity did no more than partially reassure me. From time to time we were enveloped in a whirlwind of sparks, which the Mage regarded as graciously emitted in our honour—an honour with which I would very gladly have dispensed. In the portion of the temple where we stood, the walls were hung with human hair of every colour; and, from space to space, human hair hung also in festoons from pyramids of skulls chased in gold and ebony. Besides all this, the place was filled with the fumes of sulphur and bitumen, oppressing the brain and taking away the breath. I trembled; my legs seemed to give way; Firouzkah supported me. "Take me hence," I whispered; "take me from the sight of thy god. Nothing save thine own presence has enabled me to endure *his* presence for a moment!"

It was some time before I fully recovered. In order to effect my restoration, the Dives introduced a fresher air through orifices in the vault of the cavern where we had supped the night before. They also redecorated the cavern itself in a novel manner, and prepared for us an exquisite repast. I was thus enabled to listen to the Mage with renewed patience. What my terrible host told me about his religion did not indeed possess the charms of novelty: I knew most of it before, and I paid small heed to this part of his discourse. But his moral teachings pleased me hugely, since they flattered passion and abolished remorse. He greatly vaunted his Hall of Fire—told us that the Dives had built it, but that he himself had supplied the decorations at the risk of his life. I asked him for no explanations on this point; I was even afraid lest he should give them unasked. I could not think of those skulls, of that human hair, of what he called "decorations" without trembling. I should have feared the worst in that dreadful place if I had not been so sure of the heart of Firouzkah.

Fortunately I was not called upon to listen to the Mage's discourses more than once a day. The rest of our time was spent in amusements and pleasures of every kind. These the Dives never failed to supply; and Firouzkah caused them to gratify my every taste by an infinite variety. Her assiduous care, her ingenuity of tenderness, made my every moment hurry by in such voluptuous enjoyment that I was in no case to measure the flight of time; and the present had so far

obliterated the past that I never once thought of my kingdom. But the Mage put an end, all too soon, alas! to this period of delirium and enchantment. One day, one fatal day, he said to us: "We are about to separate, my dear children; the hour of bliss, for which I have sighed for such long years, is approaching; I am expected in the Palace of Subterranean Fire, where I shall bathe in joys untold, and possess treasures passing man's imagination. Ah! why has this moment of supreme felicity been so long delayed? The inexorable hand of death would not then have torn from my side my dear Soudabé, whose charms had never suffered from the ravages of Time! We should then have partaken together of that perfect happiness which neither accident, nor the vicissitudes of life, can ever mar in the place to which I am bound."

"Ah!" I cried, "where is that divine sojourn in which a happy eternity of mutual love and tenderness may be enjoyed? Let us follow you thither."

"You may do so, if you worship my god," replied the Mage; "if you will do homage to the powers that serve him, if you will win his favour by such sacrifices as he ordains."

"I will worship any god you like," said I, "if he will suffer me to live for ever with Firouzkah, and free from the horrible fear of seeing pale disease or bloody steel threaten her beautiful life. What must I do besides?"

"You must," replied the Mage, "cause the religion of Zoroaster to be received in your dominions, raze the mosques to the ground, erect Halls of Fire in their stead, and, finally, sacrifice without pity all whom you cannot convert to the true faith. This is what I have myself done, though not so openly as you can do it; and, as a sign of what I have been able to accomplish, see all these locks of hair that ornament my Hall of Fire—dear evidences that I am about to enter the gates of the only place where lasting joys are to be found."

"Quick, quick! let us go and cause heads to be cut off," said Firouzkah, "and so amass a treasure of human hair! You will agree, my dear Alasi, that the sacrifice of a whole tribe of crazy wretches who will not accept our belief, is as nothing if we can obtain thereby the supreme felicity of loving each other to all time!"

By these flattering words Firouzkah obtained my complete assent, and the Mage, having reached the height of his wishes, resumed: "I esteem myself happy, King of Kharezme, in seeing you, at last, convinced of the truth of my faith. Several times have I despaired, and I should certainly not have taken so much trouble about you if you had not been the husband of the daughter of Filanshaw—my friend and my disciple. Ah! what honour will be mine when your conversion is known in the Palace of Subterranean Fire! Hence, therefore! Depart at once. A ship, ready equipped, awaits you upon the shore. Your subjects will receive you with acclamation. Do all the good you can. Remember that to destroy those who are obstinate in error is accounted a great merit by the stern god you have promised to serve. When you deem that your reward is fully earned, go to Istakhar, and there, on the Terrace of the Beacon Lights, make a holocaust of the hair of those whom you have immolated in so good a cause. The nostrils of the Dives will be gratified by that sweet-smelling sacrifice. They will discover to you the steep and secret stairway, and open the ebony portals: I shall receive you in my arms, and see that you are received with fitting honours."

Thus did I yield to the last seductions of the Mage. I should have laughed his exhortation to scorn if my heart had not been so interested in the truth of his promises. For a moment indeed I did misdoubt them, and thought they might be false; but, nothing venture, nothing have, and soon I decided that, in view of the predicted reward, every hazard must be risked.

No doubt the Mage, urged on by ambition and an evil covetousness, had made a similar calculation,—to find himself ultimately deceived and cozened, as are all the miserable wretches who find their way to this place!

The Mage wished to see us embark. He embraced us affectionately at parting, and advised that we should keep in our service, as followers on whom we could always rely, the twenty negroes appointed to navigate our ship. Scarcely had we set sail when we heard a terrible sound—a sound like that of thunder as the lightning goes crashing among the mountains and heaping up the valley with ruin. Turning, we saw the rock we had just left crumble into the sea. We heard the cries of joy with which the exultant Dives then filled the air; and we judged that the Mage was already on his way to Istakhar.

Our twenty negroes were such good sailors, so adroit and alert, that we should have taken them to form part of the Mage's supernatural following if they had not assured us that they were simple Fire-worshippers, and no more. As their chief, Zouloulou by name, seemed very well acquainted with all the mysteries of the cavern, we asked him what had become of the pages and the little Georgian girls, for whom we had conceived a liking. He replied that the Intelligences, who first gave them to the Mage, had disposed of them, doubtless for the best, and that we could not do better than leave them in their hands.

My subjects celebrated my return, and my marriage, with such transports of joy that I quite blushed at the designs I entertained against them. They had found Firouz amiable as a boy; they found Firouzkah divine in the habiliments of her sex. My mother, in particular, overwhelmed her with caresses. But she changed her tone when we discovered that Motaleb, whom she had just established as her first minister, had thrown all the affairs with which he was charged into great disorder. She nourished a fancy for that ignorant vizier, and took it in very ill part that we should be angry with him. Firouzkah, who cared very little what she thought, would whisper in my ear: "Motaleb has a very good head of hair; let us cut off his head." But I was satisfied with deposing him from his office, and appointed, in his stead, a feeble old man who did everything as he was told, and never hesitated to cause the Great Mosque at Zerbend to be razed to the ground so soon as I ordered its demolition.

This revolutionary measure excited universal surprise. The queen, my mother, came in haste to ask what I meant by an act so impious and sacrilegious. "We mean," answered Firouzkah quietly, "never again to hear mention of Mahomet, and all his crazy dreams, and to establish, in Kharezme, the religion of Zoroaster, as being the only religion worthy of credence." At this reply the good princess could not contain herself. She overwhelmed me with angry words. She heaped upon us imprecations—which have been only too terribly effectual. I listened to her without resentment; but Firouzkah induced me to commit her to her apartments—where, not long afterwards, she ended her life in bitterness of spirit, and cursing the hour when she had brought me into the world.

Iniquity had now no terrors for me. I was resolved to stop at nothing if so I might allay the fear of an ultimate separation from Firouzkah—which fear an inordinate affection had implanted in my breast.

At first I met with so little resistance that Firouzkah, who saw how easily the courtiers and the army yielded to my wishes, would say: "Where can we get hair? How many locks I see would be of admirable use to us if only the heads that bear them were a little more obdurate! It is to be hoped there may be a change, or we stand in danger of never getting to Istakhar."

At last there came a change indeed! Most of those who frequented the Halls of Fire I had erected were only waiting for a favourable moment to rise in rebellion. Several plots were

discovered, and then executions became frequent. Firouzkah, who wished to proceed with order and method, was fully acquainted with the zeal and qualifications of Zouloulou, and established him as her head missionary. She caused him to get up, every day, on to a tall stage, erected in the midst of the city square, to which the people most resorted—and there the brazen negro, vested in a robe of vermilion, his countenance assured, his voice piercing, would pour fourth his orations, while his nineteen compeers stood ready, with drawn swords, at the bottom of the steps leading to the stage, and cut off the heads of all who refused to accept the preacher's teaching; nor, as I need scarcely add, did they forget to secure the hair of their victims.

Mine was still the stronger side. I was beloved by the soldiery, who generally care very little what god they serve so long as they are caressed by their king. Persecution produced its ordinary effect. The people courted martyrdom. They came from all parts to deride Zouloulou—whom nothing disconcerted—and to get their heads cut off.

The number of deaths became at last so great that the army itself was scandalised. Motaleb incited them to rebellion. He sent secretly, in the name of the soldiers, of the nobles, and of the people generally, to offer the crown of Kharezme to Rondabah—inviting her to come and avenge the death of her father, and of her brother, and her own wrongs.

We were not without information regarding these secret machinations—for parasites seldom altogether abandon a monarch so long as the crown still glitters on his head; but we felt no serious alarm till we perceived that we were becoming the weaker party. My guards had already, on more than one occasion, suffered the negroes to be maltreated—at a cost, to Zouloulou, of his two ears. He was the first to advise us not to lose the fruit of our labours.

By the care and vigilance of this zealous follower, everything was soon made ready for our departure. In the middle of the night I left my kingdom, which was by this time in almost full rebellion against my rule—left it with a heart as triumphant as if I had been a conqueror instead of a fugitive!

Firouzkah persuaded me to allow her to resume male attire; and that is why the Calif Vathek mistook her sex. We were mounted, she and I, on two steeds, as swift, as superb, as Shebdid and Bariz, the ever-memorable coursers of Khosrou. The twenty negroes each led a camel. Ten of the camels were laden with human hair.

Though anxious to reach our journey's end, yet, in sooth, we did not hurry overmuch. It was, no doubt, by some true presentiment that we could not bring ourselves to finally abandon our present pleasures for those we had been led to anticipate. We used to encamp at night, and often stayed, for days together, at the places of delight that lay in our way. For half-a-moon we had been enjoying the beauty of the vale of Maravanahar when, one night, I awoke suddenly, under the oppression of a confused and fearful dream. What was my horror at not finding Firouzkah by my side! I rose, half beside myself, and quickly left our tent to seek her. She was coming towards me—distracted. "Let us fly, dear Alasi," she said. "Let us to horse instantly, and gain the desert, which is but at a few parasangs' distance; Zouloulou knows all its hiding-places, and will lead us to some spot where we may find shelter from the danger that threatens us."

"I fear nothing, beloved," I replied, "now that thou art found again; and will follow thee whithersoever thou listest."

At the point of day we entered a wood so thick that the sun's rays scarce penetrated into its dark recesses. "Let us stop here," said Firouzkah, "and I will tell you of the strange adventure that befell me last night. I was sleeping by your side when Zouloulou woke me cautiously, and whispered in my ear that Rondabah was only about a hundred paces away, that she had wandered some little distance from the army she was leading into Kharezme, and that she was at that

moment resting in her pavilion, with no other following than a few of her guards and some of her women; and, moreover, that these were all sound asleep. At these words I was seized simultaneously with fear and fury. I remembered the prediction of the Mage, and, dressing myself in haste, I felt the edge of my sword. ‘What do you mean to do?’ asked the eunuch. ‘Moderate yourself. Be warned. You can accomplish nothing against the life of Rondabah. The Mage ordered me to tell you so, if occasion required, and to tell you further that you would yourself perish in the attempt. A Power against whom nothing can prevail, protects the Princess of Ghilan. But if you will be calm, and listen to my advice, we can do much worse to her than cut off her head.’ While he was thus speaking we had left your tent and reached our destination. Zouloulou, who saw that I kept perfect silence, said, ‘You are quite right to rely on me. I will cause all Rondabah’s people to inhale certain fumes, and sleep for a long time without waking. We shall easily make our way, undetected, as far as her pavilion, and can then, as our fancy dictates, bedaub the face of your enemy with this unguent, which possesses the power of making the most beautiful countenance ugly and repulsive.’

“So said, so done. But Rondabah, whose slumbers were natural and undrugged, nearly prevented me from accomplishing more than half my purpose: I rubbed her face so hard that she awoke with a cry of pain and terror. Hastily did I finish my work, and then, having detached a mirror that hung from the girdle of one of her women, I presented it to her, and said: ‘Acknowledge, majestic princess, that that little monster of a Firouz is a model of courtesy; he flatters himself that this beautifying unguent, which he has just applied to your countenance, will cause you to remember him—always!’ Whether the masculine courage of Rondabah was daunted by my presence, or whether she was filled with despair at finding herself the most loathsome object in the world, I know not; but she fainted away. We left her to come to herself again at her leisure.

“I was naturally pleased at having prevented my rival from reaping the triumph predicted by the Mage; but that feeling soon gave way to fear lest we should be pursued. Now, however, we are in a place of safety. Let us rest here. This breast, which is still all a-flutter with its late alarms, will serve you as a pillow. Alas! Firouzkah and Firouz may have been guilty of acts of cruelty, but only when others have attempted to dispute with her the empire of your heart!”

The seductive turn which Firouzkah thus gave to her story did not altogether blind me to the atrocity of the crime she had just committed; and I was surprised that, with a heart so tender and full of feeling where I was concerned, she could yet be capable of frenzied hate and the most horrible cruelty. What struck me most, however, in her story was the argument used by Zouloulou to prevent her from carrying her criminal designs on Rondabah to even greater lengths. “The Power that protects Rondabah,” said I to myself, “must love the good, for she is good. That Power, which is pure and supreme, cannot then be the same Power which is about to receive into its palace beings such as Firouzkah and myself, for we are wicked. But if it reigns supreme over all other Powers, what is to become of us? O Mahomet! O Prophet beloved of the world’s Creator, thou hast forsaken me utterly and without hope! What refuge have I, save with thine enemies?”

With this despairing thought came the last feelings of remorse I was destined to experience. Such feelings I always owed to the Princess of Ghilan; but, alas! they always came in vain!

I willingly allowed Firouzkah to lure me from such melancholy reflections—reflections that seemed to make her anxious. I could not recall the past—probably I should not have recalled it if I could. No course was open to me save to leap, with eyes self-bound, into the yawning abyss of the future.

The cloud passed away in a soft rain of tender kisses. But Firouzkah, by intoxicating me with love, redoubled my fear of losing her by some such unexpected danger as we had just avoided. She, on her side, was assailed with doubts as to Rondabah's permanent disfigurement. She regretted the time we had lost on the journey—a journey which, as she believed, and as I strove to believe, was to end in the abode of an even greater felicity. Thus, with a common consent, and to the great joy of our twenty black eunuchs, we now used the utmost diligence to reach Istakhar.

It was already night when we came to the Terrace of the Beacon Lights; and, notwithstanding all that we could say to one another of endearment and encouragement, we were filled with a kind of horror as we walked it from end to end. There was no moon in the firmament to shed upon us its soft rays. The stars alone were shining there; but their trembling light only seemed to intensify the sombre grandeur of all that met our gaze. We regretted, indeed, none of the beauties, none of the riches of the world we were about to leave. We thought only of living in a world where we should be for ever inseparable; and yet invisible ties seemed still to draw us back and hold us to the earth.

We could not repress a shudder when we saw that the negroes had done piling up our enormous heap of human locks. With trembling hands we approached our torches to set it on fire; and we thought to die for very fear when the earth opened before our feet, the rock shattering into a thousand pieces. At the sight of the stairway that seemed so easy of descent, and the tapers illuminating it, we were somewhat reassured. We embraced in a transport, and, each taking the other's hand, began cautiously to descend—when the twenty negroes, whom we had forgotten, hurled themselves upon us so impetuously that we fell, headlong, against the ebony portal at the bottom.

I will not describe the dread impression produced upon us by the aspect of the place in which we now are—all who are here have had that fearful experience—but one object of terror peculiar to ourselves was the sight of the Mage. He was pacing to and fro amid the restless, miserable crowd, with his right hand on his breast. He saw us. The flames devouring his heart leapt out through his eyelids. He darted upon us a fearful glance, and hurried away. A moment after, a malevolent Dive accosted Firouzkah. "Rondabah," said he, "has recovered her beauty. She has just ascended the throne of Kharezme; the hour of her triumph is that of your undying despair!"

At last Eblis declared all the horror of our fate. What a god have we served! What a fearful doom has he pronounced upon us! What! we who had loved one another so well, must our love be turned to hate? We, who had come hither to enjoy an eternity of love, must we hate each other to all time! O dire, O accursed thought! O for instant annihilation!

Sobbing, sobbing, as they uttered these words, Alasi and Firouzkah threw themselves into each other's arms; and for a long space a mournful silence reigned in that unhappy company.

But at last this silence was broken by Vathek, who asked the third prince to relate his story. For Vathek's curiosity was still intact. He had yet to suffer the last punishment those criminal souls were destined to endure: the final extinction of every feeling save hatred and despair.