

KHALED: A TALE OF ARABIA

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Khaled: A Tale of Arabia by F. Marion Crawford

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F. MARION CRAWFORD

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A Tale of Arabia

By F. MARION CRAWFORD

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CHAPTER I

KHALED stood in the third heaven, which is the heaven of precious stones, and of Asrael, the angel of Death. In the midst of the light shed by the fruit of the trees Asrael himself is sitting, and will sit until the day of the resurrection from the dead, writing in his book the names of those who are to be born, and blotting out the names of those who have lived their years and must die. Each of the trees has seventy thousand branches, each branch bears seventy thousand fruits, each fruit is composed of seventy thousand diamonds, rubies, emeralds, carbuncles, jacinths, and other precious stones. The stature and proportions of Asrael are so great that his eyes are seventy thousand days' journey apart, the one from the other.

Khaled stood motionless during ten months and thirteen days, waiting until Asrael should rest from his writing and look towards him. Then came the holy night called Al Kadr, the night of peace in which the

Koran came down from heaven. Asrael paused, and raising his eyes from the scroll saw Khaled standing before him.

Asrael knew Khaled, who was one of the genii converted to the faith on hearing Mohammed read the Koran by night in the valley Al Nakhlah. He wondered, however, when he saw him standing in his presence; for the genii are not allowed to pass even the gate of the first heaven, in which the stars hang by chains of gold, each star being inhabited by an angel who guards the entrance against the approach of devils.

Asrael looked at Khaled in displeasure, therefore, supposing that he had eluded the heavenly sentinels and concealed an evil purpose. But Khaled inclined himself respectfully.

'There is no Allah but Allah. Mohammed is the prophet of Allah,' he said, thus declaring himself to be of the Moslem genii, who are upright and are true believers.

'How camest thou hither?' asked Asrael.

'By the will of Allah, who sent his angel with me to the gate,' Khaled answered. 'I am come hither that thou mayest write down my name in the book of life and death, that I may be a man on earth, and after an appointed time thou shalt blot it out again and I shall die.'

Asrael gazed at him and knew that this was the will

of Allah, for the angels are thus immediately made conscious of the divine commands. He took up his pen to write, but before he had traced the first letter he paused.

'This is the night Al Kadr,' he said. 'If thou wilt, tell me therefore thy story, for I am now at leisure to hear it.'

'Thou knowest that I am of the upright genii,' Khaled answered, 'and I am well disposed towards men. In the city of Riad, in Arabia, there rules a powerful king, the Sultan of the kingdom of Nejed, blessed in all things save that he has no son to inherit his vast dominions. One daughter only has been born to him in his old age, of such marvellous beauty that even the Black Eyed Virgins enclosed in the fruit of the tree Sedrat, who wait for the coming of the faithful, would seem but mortal women beside her. Her eyes are as the deep water in the wells of Zobeideh when it is night and the stars are reflected therein. Her hair is finer than silk, red with henna, and abundant as the foliage of the young cypress tree. Her face is as fair as the kernels of young almonds, and her mouth is sweeter than the mellow date and more fragrant than 'Ood mingled with ambergris. She possesses moreover all the virtues which become women, for she is as modest as she is beautiful and as charitable as she is modest. From all parts of Arabia and Egypt, and from Syria and