

# An Arabian Nightmare

By Fitz-James O'Brien

It came to pass, some years ago, that I went to the fair of Nishin, Novogorod, which is in the land of the Muscovites, who are unbelievers, and worship the pictures of created things. And, lo! I took to the fair fur caps and cloaks from Thibet, and woollen garments from Cashmere, and also the dates of Bokhara. And our Lord the Prophet, whose tomb I have visited (and whose name is blessed), gave me a ready sale for my merchandise, so that I had soon a girdle full of roubles, which are coins of the Muscovites. And, behold! I made acquaintance with one of the unbelievers, whose name was Demski, and who had brought to the fair garments of white fur and garments of seal-skin. And, of a truth, before the fair was over, I was greatly troubled in my body by reason of the noise and the crowd, and the anxieties of buying and selling; and also by reason of the unwholesome food, wherewith the Muscovites (may God enlighten them!) are wont to fill themselves. And I was afflicted with a great trembling of the limbs, so that walking fatigued me—although I am one who had journeyed to Mecca (the riches of which place may God increase). And whereas, when I was in Khiva, my girdle caused a shortness of the breath, and a constriction of the ribs: it would now have fallen over my waist, if the good roubles, whereof our Lord the Prophet had permitted me to despoil the Muscovites, had not kept it in its place. And when Demski saw that I walked with difficulty, and was even as a peeled wand for thinness, he said, “Verily, oh Hamet! the way to Khiva is long, and the motion of camels, I have heard, is an affliction to the limbs: it were better for thee to go with me and my merchandise unto Berezow, which is a town on the river Obb, in the province of Tobolsk; for though the winter is long and cold; yet, when we roll thee up in furs, and give thee the warmest corner of the stove, and cause the pores of thy skin to be opened by means of the sweating house, thou wilt not think of the snow or of the long night.” And I said, “Of a truth, oh my friend! the words of the poet are exemplified in thee, saying,

‘In a brother I have found no love, but a stranger hath shown me affection.  
And a stranger has been to me more than the son of my mother.’”

But he answered, “These are foolish words! When I come to Khiva, thou wilt prepare the kabobs and the pilaff for me. And now, oh Hamet, make ready thy goods; for on the second day we shall harness the horse to the sledge.”

And on the second day Demski loaded his sledge with merchandise, even with dried meat and fish, and with brandy, and with stewed pears (may Allah confound them and exterminate them!), for of such things do the Muscovites eat. And he spread fur cloaks upon the merchandise, and we sat thereon, and he struck the horse with a whip having three lashes, and we went like the horses of the Kurds, and like the camels of the Bedawee.

And, lo, the journey was long; but the novelty thereof sustained me, for from my youth up, I have loved to see strange places, and to hear of the people who dwell therein. And when we came to Berezow, we found there Petrovna, the wife of Demski, and Alexandrovitch, their little son, and I gave to her a handkerchief of bright colours, and to him a tarboosh of red cloth; so that they were glad to see me, and I abode with them during the winter. And, verily, I saw a strange thing; for the sun appeared not for the space of five months. And when I saw this, I said, “Of a

truth this is a land forsaken of God. And it is because the people thereof worship the pictures of created things.”

And I abode much in the house, going only from the stove to the sweating-house, and from the sweating-house to the stove. And in the sweating-house they took from me my clothes, and set me on warm stones, and poured water on stones heated in the fire, until the house was filled with the steam thereof, and beat my body gently with the twigs of birch, until the perspiration ran from me; and indeed this is of great convenience in so cold a land. And in the house we talked of the countries we had seen, and of the wonderful works of God: and Demski taught me the game of chess, and I taught him that of Ahama, which I had learned of an Osruanlee when I journeyed to Mecca, (which may God establish!).

And, lo! one evening I noticed that Alexandrovitch, the son of Demski, was cutting out the bits of bone wherewith the game of chess is played, and fashioning them into the images of created things. And I saw that the bone wherfrom he was cutting them was that of a large animal; and I said, “Oh Demski! whence is that bone for I have seen here no animals whose bones are of such a bigness, but only a few hares and foxes, with white fur. For in this accursed land, God has withdrawn the light of his countenance from the animals, and there is no colour in them.” And Demski told me that the bone was found in the ice; and that also whole animals were found therein, with the hair and flesh on them; and that amongst them were the bones of the elephant, and even entire elephants, which are animals that I have seen in the land of the Mogul, where the inhabitants (may Allah instruct them!) worship cows. And I said, “Oh Demski! how came these animals in the ice? for they are animals that inhabit hot countries, and could not live in this cold place, which causeth the blood to stand still, and maketh the fingers like those of dead men.” And he said, “Thy question is that of a man of understanding; and verily there was a learned man here, whom the Czar (whom God preserve!) sent to us, a man of the nation of Franks, who examined these bones, and looked at the creatures as they lay in the ice, and said to me and to others, that this land had once been warmer and fit for such creatures, and that these frozen rivers and seas had once flowed like the great rivers and the ocean which thou hast seen.” And I said, “Oh Demski! this is but foolishness; and God will confound these Feringees, who pry into the origin of things. For these are works of Eblis and of the Jân, and these creatures are shut up here by enchantment, even as Gog and Magog were shut up by Iskander, in the mountains near the Caspian Sea. And Gog and Magog are always digging through the mountain to get out; but cannot, by reason of the strong enchantment wherewith they are enchanted; nor shall they, because they cannot say, ‘Inshallah!’ which means ‘God willing.’ But one day there shall be a boy amongst them, called ‘Inshallah;’ and one of them shall say to him, ‘Inshallah, I will dig through the rock;’ and straightway they shall dig through the rock, and overspread the world, and Deijal shall come forth to lead them. And who knows but these creatures are shut up here by like enchantment, and will one day come forth?”

And Demski and Petrovna, and Alexandrovitch, their son, allowed that I had spoken wisely, and praised me much; so that when supper came I was elated, and eat of the dried meat and of fish, and of stewed pears, which I had never before tasted (may Allah confound them!); and drank of the brandy until I shouted and sang, as one should not shout and sing who has travelled to Mecca—(may God establish it and maintain it!) And, behold, when I lay down on the stone to sleep, I was much pleased that I had spoken so wisely about Eblis and the Jân, and Gogand Magog, and Iskander; for it beseemeth a schereef to instruct the ignorant, and one who hath wisdom to impart it to one who hath not. So I slept.

But about the middle of the night I felt a heavy hand upon my breast, and I awoke; and, lo! when one of the evil ones stood by me, even a Jin, having the face of a bull, and a hand like the foot of an elephant, and his hand was upon my breast. And he said, "Oh Hamet, arise and go with me!" And I answered, "Oh Bull Face! whither?" And he said, "Unto the shores of the Frozen Sea, and to the palace of Eblis, and to the abode of the enchanted creatures of whom thou spakest before supper.

Then said I, "Now are the words of the poet accomplished, for he said:—

“ ‘Speak no evil of the Jân, for they are always about thee,  
And one of them shall carry thy words to the rest in the palace of Eblis.’ ”

And the Bull Face grinned. And I arose, and went with him out of the house; and he took me by the hand, and we ran swiftly, like the Mahry, on which the Tonarick rides forth to plunder. And when I saw that he meddled not with Demski, nor with Petrovna, his wife, neither with any of the people of Berezow, I said, "See, now! what it is to worship the pictures of created things; for the Jân regard these people as brothers." And the Bull Face snorted. And by this time we had come to the shores of the Frozen Sea; but the ice was not all of equal strength, nor was the sea covered by it; but great shapes of ice sailed down it, which were of a blue colour, by reason of the moon. And the Jin would have carried me over; but when he essayed it, I was too heavy for him; so that he said, "Of a truth, this wretch must have some holy thing about him, that I cannot lift him." And I remembered with joy that I had on my heart a piece of cloth wherewith I had touched the Holy Stone at Mecca, and I repeated the verses:—

“Keep holy things about thee, and gird thee with sacred spells:  
that thy wickedness may be forgiven for the sake of that thou wearest.”

And the Jin struck the ice with a stone, and made it crack; and, lo! I heard it cracking and splitting all across the sea, until the sound thereof was louder than that of thunder. And the Jân who were in the palace of Eblis heard it; and straightway three of them, having the faces of hawks and the claws of eagles, came flying to us. And the Bull Face said: "Oh Hook Noses! Eblis sent me to bring this wretch to him, but he is too heavy for me, by reason of some holy thing which he hath about him. Help me to carry him." And they took me in their arms, and flew. And when I felt the swiftness of our motion through the air, and reflected that the evil ones might let me fall on the ice, or into the cold sea, I resolved to entreat them courteously; and I said to one of the Hook Noses who bore up my right shoulder, "Wherefore, oh my aga! doth my lord Eblis abide in this desolate place with creatures forsaken of God?" And he said: "Not choice, but necessity, brought us hither, thou abandoned one; for Eblis was once lord of the morning star, and Cod had given him a brightness well nigh equal to that of the sun, and permitted his star to be seen of men, even till the third hour of the day; but Eblis wished that his light might be greater, and that his star might be seen of men all the day long; wherefore God banished him from the morning star, and shut him up here with forsaken creatures; and as for us, we are even as he is." And the Bull Face and the Hook Noses howled for grief, and I was sorry that I had questioned them, for I thought, they have a sore burden to bear, and I have reminded them of it. And now they flew down to the land, whereon the palace of Eblis stands; and, verily, it is a land of ice, for there are neither trees nor plants in it, nor any living herb, nor any running water, but only great rocks and columns of ice; even pillars like those of Tadmor, which Solomon built in

the desert. And in these columns I saw what will scarce be believed; for I saw all manner of animals, entire and perfect, even elephants bigger than any that I ever saw in the land of the Mogul, and great deer, and crocodiles, such as live by the Nile. These were all shut up in the ice, as flies and straws are enclosed in the amber of the merchants; and the expression of their countenances was that of animals which have died in pain. And I said to them who were with me, "Oh Jân! how came these creatures here?" And one of them said, "Of a truth, this was once a land with rivers of water, and with trees and plants, both great and small, and these creatures lived therein; but when God sent Eblis hither, he caused the Sun to shine on other parts of the world and not on this, so that these creatures were all frozen up here, and the breath went out of them."

Then thought I, "Lo! now this is what the Frank said to Demski and to others. Surely God has cursed these Franks, for they speak like the Jâns." But though there was no sun in this land, there was a light, such as I never saw before or since; for it proceeded from no visible cause, but resembled the reflection of a lamp upon a wall; and verily the ice was luminous, and I saw pale flames on the top of every rock and pillar of ice, and they resembled the mist which surrounds the moon when rain is about to be sent. And the flames were everywhere, even in the ground whereon I walked, and in the air which I breathed; but there was no heat in the flame. And, lo! we came into the hall where Eblis sat, and it was all of luminous ice, and the inhabitants thereof were of ice also; and as I looked at the Jân who had brought me, behold! they were all of ice, and pale flames were around all their heads, and at the ends of all their fingers, and their bodies were luminous, so that I could see their hearts beat. And Eblis sat on a frozen throne, and his body looked like a pure opal without flaw, and his face was like unto a milk-white cornelian. And there was no light in the palace, or in all that land, but that which came from the ice, and from the inhabitants thereof.

And they set me in the midst. And Eblis said, "What present has my servant Hamet brought to his lord?" And I answered, "Nay, my Sultan; I was taken in the night, and have brought nothing, and, moreover, I am not the servant of my Sultan; but if he will send me back to Berezow, to the house of Demski, I will give him, as a present, fur caps of Thibet, and woollen garments of Cashmere, inasmuch as he needeth them sorely." And thereat the men of ice laughed, until their joints cracked horribly. And Eblis said, "Yea! but thou hast served me often; even at the fair of Novogorod, when thou didst sell fur caps for two roubles, that were not worth one; and again, no later than last night, when thou didst drink brandy and eat stewed pears." And I said, "Of a truth, the fur caps were not good, and the stewed pears are an accursed food; but I am a poor man, and my Sultan will take a small present from me." And he answered, "Yea! I will take even what thou hast with thee;" and turning to a blue Jin, who stood near him, he said, "Take from him the girdle of roubles which is about his waist." And when I heard this, I thought, "It were better for me to die than to let these accursed ones have my roubles; as man can only die once, but poverty is an abiding affliction." So I took courage, and cried, "Oh! Frozen Ones, accursed are your mothers and your sisters; but my roubles ye shall not have." And I held up my garments and ran; and the men of ice ran too, and slid round about me on the ice, and caught at me with their slippery hands, and chilled me with their icy breath. And the rocks, and the pillars, and the frozen ground, shot out pale flames at me as I passed; and the creatures in the pillars, the expression of whose countenances was that of creatures which had died in pain, writhed themselves in the ice, and grinned at me horribly. And all the men of ice shouted, "Hamet! Stop, Hamet! Thy roubles, Hamet! Thy roubles!" And their words struck against the rocks, and ran along the frozen ground, and along the surface of the sea, until all that desolate place repeated "Hamet! Stop,

Hamet! Thy roubles, Hamet! Thy roubles!” and my foot slipped. And as I strove to save myself from falling, behold! I was on my back on the stove in the house of Demski, and he and his wife and their son were shouting to me. And they said that I had slept long: but how I escaped from those frozen ones, I know not; but I suppose the bit of cloth, with which I had touched the Holy Stone, redeemed me from them, even from the power of the Jân; by which one may see that it is good to go to Mecca, and that Mohammed is the Prophet of God.

And when the spring came I departed from Demski and his wife, and returned to Khiva, both I and my roubles, whereof those evil ones had wished to rob me.