

How Ali Came to the Black Country

By Lord Dunsany

Shooshan the barber went to Shep the maker of teeth to discuss the state of England. They agreed that it was time to send for Ali.

So Shooshan stepped late that night from the little shop near Fleet Street and made his way back again to his house in the ends of London and sent at once the message that brought Ali.

And Ali came, mostly on foot, from the country of Persia, and it took him a year to come; but when he came he was welcome.

And Shep told Ali what was the matter with England and Shooshan swore that it was so, and Ali looking out of the window of the little shop near Fleet Street beheld the ways of London and audibly blessed King Solomon and his seal.

When Shep and Shooshan heard the names of King Solomon and his seal both asked, as they had scarcely dared before, if All had it. All patted a little bundle of silks that he drew from his inner raiment. It was there.

Now concerning the movements and courses of the stars and the influence on them of spirits of Earth and devils this age has been rightly named by some The Second Age of Ignorance. But Ali knew. And by watching nightly, for seven nights in Bagdad, the way of certain stars he had found out the dwelling place of Him they Needed.

Guided by Ali all three set forth for the Midlands. And by the reverence that was manifest in the faces of Shep and Shooshan towards the person of Ali, some knew what Ali carried, while others said that it was the tablets of the Law, others the name of God, and others that he must have a lot of money about him. So they passed Slod and Apton.

And at last they came to the town for which Ali sought, that spot over which he had seen the shy stars wheel and swerve away from their orbits, being troubled. Verily when they came there were no stars, though it was midnight. And Ali said that it was the appointed place. In harems in Persia in the evening when the tales go round it is still told how All and Shep and Shooshan came to the Black country.

When it was dawn they looked upon the country and saw how it was without doubt the appointed place, even as Ali had said, for the earth had been taken out of pits and burned and left lying in heaps, and there were many factories, and they stood over the town and as it were rejoiced. And with one voice Shep and Shooshan gave praise to Ali.

And Ali said that the great ones of the place must needs be gathered together, and to this end Shep and Shooshan went into the town and there spoke craftily. For they said that Ali had of his wisdom contrived as it were a patent and a novelty which should greatly benefit England. And when they heard how he sought nothing for his novelty save only to benefit mankind they consented to speak with Ali and see his novelty. And they came forth and met Ali.

And Ali spake and said unto them: "O lords of this place; in the book that all men know it is written how that a fisherman casting his net into the sea drew up a bottle of brass, and when he took the stopper from the bottle a dreadful genie of horrible aspect rose from the bottle, as it were like a smoke, even to darkening the sky, whereat the fisherman . . ." And the great ones of that place said: "We have heard the story." And Au said: "What became of that genie after he was safely thrown back into the sea is not properly spoken of by any save those that pursue the study of demons and not with certainty by any man, but that the stopper that bore the ineffable

seal and bears it to this day became separate from the bottle is among those things that man may know." And when there was doubt among the great ones Au drew forth his bundle and one by one removed those many silks till the seal stood revealed; and some of them knew it for the seal and others knew it not.

And they looked curiously at it and listened to Ali, and Ali said:

"Having heard how evil is the case of England, how a smoke has darkened the country, and in places (as men say) the grass is black, and how even yet your factories multiply, and haste and noise have become such that men have no time for song, I have therefore come at the bidding of my good friend Shooshan, barber of London, and of Shep, a maker of teeth, to make things well with you."

And they said: "But where is your patent and your novelty?"

And Ali said: "Have I not here the stopper and on it, as good men know, the ineffable seal? Now I have learned in Persia how that your trains that make the haste, and hurry men to and fro, and your factories and the digging of your pits and all the things that are evil are every one of them caused and brought about by steam."

"Is it not so?" said Shooshan.

"It is even so," said Shep.

"Now it is clear," said Ali, "that the chief devil that vexes England and has done all this harm, who herds men into cities and will not let them rest, is even the devil Steam."

Then the great ones would have rebuked him but one said: "No, let us hear him, perhaps his patent may improve on steam."

And to them hearkening Ali went on thus: "O Lords of this place, let there be made a bottle of strong steel, for I have no bottle with my stopper, and this being done let all the factories, trains, digging of pits, and all evil things soever that may be done by steam be stopped for seven days, and the men that tend them shall go free, but the steel bottle for my stopper I will leave open in a likely place. Now that chief devil, Steam, finding no factories to enter into, nor no trains, sirens nor pits prepared for him, and being curious and accustomed to steel pots, will verily enter one night into the bottle that you shall make for my stopper, and I shall spring forth from my hiding with my stopper and fasten him down with the ineffable seal which is the seal of King Solomon and deliver him up to you that you cast him into the sea."

And the great ones answered Ali and they said: "But what should we gain if we lose our prosperity and be no longer rich?"

And Au said: "When we have cast this devil into the sea there will come back again the woods and ferns and all the beautiful things that the world hath, the little leaping hares shall be seen at play, there shall be music on the hills again, and at twilight ease and quiet and after the twilight stars."

And "Verily," said Shooshan, "there shall be the dance again."

"Aye," said Shep, "there shall be the country dance."

But the great ones spake and said, denying Ali: "We will make no such bottle for your stopper nor stop our healthy factories or good trains, nor cease from our digging of pits nor do anything that you desire, for an interference with steam would strike at the roots of that prosperity that you see so plentifully all around us."

Thus they dismissed Ali there and then from that place where the earth was torn up and burnt, being taken out of pits, and where factories blazed all night with a demoniac glare; and they dismissed with him both Shooshan, the barber, and Shep, the maker of teeth: so that a week later Ali started from Calais on his long walk back to Persia.

And all this happened thirty years ago, and Shep is an old man now and Shooshan older, and many mouths have bit with the teeth of Shep (for he has a knack of getting them back whenever his customers die), and they have written again to Ali away in the country of Persia with these words, saying:

“O Ali. The devil has indeed begotten a devil, even that spirit Petrol. And the young devil waxeth, and increaseth in lustihood and is ten years old and becoming like to his father. Come therefore and help us with the ineffable seal. For there is none like Ali.”

And Ali turns where his slaves scatter rose-leaves, letting the letter fall, and deeply draws from his hookah a puff of the scented smoke, right down into his lungs, and sighs it forth and smiles, and lolling round on to his other elbow speaks comfortably and says, “And shall a man go twice to the help of a dog?”

And with these words he thinks no more of England but ponders again the inscrutable ways of God.