

Abdallah the Adite

By Richard Garnett

An aged hermit named Sergius dwelt in the wilds of Arabia, addicting himself to the pursuit of religion and alchemy. Of his creed it could only be said that it was so much better than that of his neighbours as to cause him to be commonly esteemed a Yezidi, or devil worshipper. But the better informed deemed him a Nestorian monk, who had retired into the wilderness on account of differences with his brethren, who sought to poison him.

The imputation of Yezidism against Sergius was the cause that a certain inquisitive young man resorted to him, trusting to obtain light concerning the nature of demons. But he found that Sergius could give him no information on that subject, but, on the contrary, discoursed so wisely and beautifully on holy things, that his pupil's intellect was enlightened, and his enthusiasm was inflamed, and he longed to go forth and instruct the ignorant people around him; the Saracens, and the Sabaeans, and the Zoroastrians, and the Carmathians, and the Baphometites, and the Paulicians, who are a remnant of the ancient Manichees.

"Nay, good youth," said Sergius, "I have renounced the sending forth of missionaries, having made ample trial with my spiritual son, the Prophet Abdallah."

"What!" exclaimed the youth, "was Abdallah the Adite thy disciple?"

"Even so," said Sergius. "Hearken to his history.

"Never have I instructed so promising a pupil as Abdallah, nor when he was first my disciple do I deem that he was other than the most simple-minded and well-intentioned of youths. I always called him son, a title I have never bestowed on another. Like thee, he had compassion on the darkness around him, and craved my leave to go forth and dispel it.

" 'My son,' said, 'I will not restrain thee: thou art no longer a child. Thou hast heard me discourse on the subject of persecution, and knowest that poison was administered to me personally on account of my inability to perceive the supernatural light emanating from the navel of Brother Gregory. Thou art aware that thou wilt be beaten with rods and pricked with goads, chained and starved in a dungeon, very probably blinded, very possibly burned with fire?'

" 'All these things I am prepared to undergo,' said Abdallah; and he embraced me and bid me farewell.

"After certain moons he returned covered with weals and scars, and his bones protruded through his skin.

" 'Whence are these weals and scars?' asked I, 'and what signifies this protrusion of thy bones?'

" 'The weals and the scars,' answered he, 'proceed from the floggings inflicted upon me by command of the Caliph; and my bones protrude by reason of the omission of his officers to furnish me with either food or drink in the dungeon wherein I was imprisoned by his orders.'

" 'O my son,' exclaimed I, 'in the eyes of faith and right reason these scars are lovelier than the moles of beauty, and 'the sight of thy bones is like the beholding of hidden treasure!'

"And Abdallah strove to look as though he believed me; nor did he entirely fail therein. And I took him, and fed him, and healed him, and sent him forth a second time into the world.

"And after a space he returned, covered as before with wounds and bruises, but comely and somewhat fat.

" 'Whence this sleekness of body, my son?' I asked.

“ ‘Through the charity of the Caliph’s wives,’ he answered, ‘who have fed me secretly, I having assured them that in remembrance of this good work each of them in the world to come would have seven husbands.’

“ ‘How knewest thou this, my son?’ I inquired.

“ ‘In truth, father,’ he said, ‘I did not know it; but I thought it probable.’

“ ‘O my son! my son!’ exclaimed I, ‘thou art on a dangerous road. To win over weak ignorant people by promises of what they shall receive in a future life, whereof thou knowest no more than they do! Knowest thou not that the inestimable blessings of religion are of an inward and spiritual nature? Did I ever promise any disciple any recompense for his enlightenment and good deeds, save flogging, starvation, and burning?’

“ ‘Never, father,’ said he, ‘and therefore thou hast had no follower of thy law save one, and he hath broken it.’

“He left me after a shorter stay than before, and again went forth to preach. After a long time he returned in good condition of body, yet manifestly having something upon his mind.

“ ‘Father,’ he said, ‘thy son hath preached with faithfulness and acceptance, and turned thousands unto righteousness. But a sorcerer hath arisen, saying, “Why follow ye Abdallah, seeing that he breathes not fire out of his mouth and nostrils?” And the people give ear unto the words that come from this man’s lips, when they behold the flame that cometh from his nose. And unless thou teachest me to do as he doth I shall assuredly perish.’

“And I told Abdallah that it was better to perish for the truth’s sake than to prolong life by lies and deceit. But he wept and lamented exceeding sore, and in the end he prevailed with me; and I taught him to breathe flame and smoke out of a hollow nut filled with combustible powder. And I took a certain substance called soap, but little known in this country, and anointed his feet therewith. And when he and the sorcerer met, both breathing flame, the people knew not which to follow; but when Abdallah walked over nine hot ploughshares, and the sorcerer could not touch one of them, they beat his brains out, and became Abdallah’s disciples.

“A long time afterwards Abdallah came to me again, this time with a joyful, and yet with somewhat of a troubled look, carrying a camel-hair blanket, which he undid, and lo! it was full of bones.

“ ‘O father,’ he said, ‘I bring thee happy tidings. We have found the bones of the camel of the prophet Ad, upon which his revelation was engraved by him.’

“ ‘If this be so,’ said I, ‘thou art acquainted with the precepts of the prophet, and hast no need of mine.’

“ ‘Nay, but father,’ said he, ‘although the revelation was without question originally engraved by the prophet on these very bones, it hath come to pass by the injury of time that not one letter of his writing can be distinguished. I have therefore come to ask thee to write it over again.’

“ ‘What!’ I exclaimed, ‘I forge a revelation in the name of the prophet Ad! Get thee behind me!’

“ ‘Thou knowest, father,’ he rejoined, ‘that if we had the original words of the prophet Ad here they would profit us nought, as by reason of their antiquity none would understand them. Seeing therefore that I myself cannot write, it is meet that thou shouldst set down in his name those things which he would have desired to deliver had he been now among us; but if thou wilt not, I shall ask Brother Gregory.’

“And when I heard him speak of having recourse to that cheat and impostor my spirit was grieved within me, and I wrote the Book of Ad myself. And I was heedful to put in none but

wholesome and profitable precepts, and more especially did I forbid polygamy, having perceived a certain inclination thereunto in my disciple.

“After many days he came again, and this time he was in violent terror and agitation, and hair was wanting to the lower part of his countenance.

“‘O Abdallah,’ I inquired, ‘where is thy beard?’

“‘In the hands of my ninth wife,’ said he.

“‘Apostate!’ I exclaimed, ‘hast thou dared to espouse more wives than one? Rememberest thou not what is written in the Book of the Prophet Ad?’

“‘O father,’ he said, ‘the revelation of Ad being, as thou knowest, so exceedingly ancient, doth of necessity require a commentary. This hath been supplied by one of my disciples, a young Syrian and natural son of Gregory, as I opine. This young man can not only write, but write to my dictation, an accomplishment in which thou hast been found lacking, O Sergius. In this gloss it is set forth how, since woman hath the ninth part of the soul of man, the prophet, in enjoining us Adites (as we now call ourselves) to take but one wife, doth instruct us to take nine; to espouse a tenth would, I grant, be damnable. It ensues, therefore, that having become enamoured of a most charming young virgin, I am constrained to repudiate one of the wives whom I have taken already. To this, each thinking that it may be her turn speedily, if not now, they will in no wise consent, and have maltreated me as thou seest, and the dens of wild beasts are at this moment abodes of peace, compared to my seraglio. What is even worse, they threaten to disclose to the people the fact, of which they have unhappily become aware, that the revelation of the blessed Ad is not written upon the bones of a camel at all, but of a cow, and will therefore be accounted spurious, inasmuch as the prophet is not recorded to have ridden upon this quadruped. And seeing that thou didst inscribe the characters, O father, I cannot but fear that the fury of the people will extend unto thee, and that thou wilt be even in danger of thy life from them.’

“This argument of Abdallah’s had much weight with me, and I the more readily consented to his request as he did not on this occasion require any imposture at my hands, but merely the restitution of his domestic peace. And I went with him to his wives, and discoursed with them, and they agreed to abide by my sentence. And, willing to please him, I directed that he should marry the beautiful virgin, and put away one of his wives who was old and ugly, and endowed with the dispositions of Sheitan.

“‘O father,’ said Abdallah, ‘thou hast brought me from death unto life! And thou, Zarah,’ he continued, ‘wilt lose nought, but gain exceedingly, in becoming the spouse of the wise and virtuous Sergius.’

“‘I marry Zarah!’ I exclaimed, ‘I! a monk!’

“‘Surely,’ said he, ‘thou would’st not take away her husband without giving her another in his stead?’

“‘If he does I will throttle him,’ cried Zarah. “And I wept sore, and made great intercession. And it was agreed that there should be a delay of forty days, in which space if any one else would marry Zarah, I should be free of her. And I promised all my substance to any one who would do this, and no one was found. And she was offered to thirteen criminals doomed to suffer death, and they all chose death. And at the last I was constrained to marry her. And truly I have now the comfort of thinking that if I have offended by encouraging Abdallah’s deceits, or otherwise, the debt is paid, and Eternal Justice hath now nothing against me; for verily I was an inmate of Gehenna until it came to pass that she was herself translated thither. And respecting the manner of her translation, inquire not thou too curiously. It was doubtless a token of the displeasure of Heaven at her enormities that the water of the well of Kefayat, which had been

known as the Diamond of the Desert, became about this time undrinkable, and pernicious to man and beast.

“As I sat in my dwelling administering to the estate of my deceased wife, which consisted principally of wines and strong liquors, Abdallah again appeared before me.

“ ‘Hast thou come,’ said I, ‘to solicit me to abet thee in any new imposture? Know, once for all, that I will not.’

“ ‘On the contrary,’ said he, ‘I am come to set thee at ease by proving to thee that I shall not again require thy assistance. Follow me.’

“And I followed him to a great plain, where was a host of armed horsemen and footmen, more than I could number. And they bore banners on which the name of Abdallah was embroidered in letters of gold. And in the midst was an ark of gold, with the bones of Ad’s camel, or cow. And by this was a great pile of the heads of men, and warriors were continually casting more and more upon the heap.

“ ‘How many?’ asked Abdallah.

“ ‘Twelve thousand, O Apostle of God,’ answered they, ‘but there are more to come.’

“ ‘Thou monster!’ said I to Abdallah.

“ ‘Nay, father,’ said he, ‘there will not be more than sixteen thousand in all, and these men were unbelievers. Moreover we have spared such of their women as were young and handsome, and have taken them for our concubines, as is ordained in the eleventh supplement to the Book of Ad, just promulgated by my authority. But come, I have other things to manifest unto thee.’

“And he led me where a stake was driven into the earth, and a man was chained unto it, and fuel was heaped all around him, and many stood by with lighted torches in their hands.

“ ‘O Abdallah,’ I exclaimed, ‘wherefore this atrocity?’

“ ‘This man,’ he replied, ‘is a blasphemer, who hath said that the Book of Ad is written on the bones of a cow.’

“ ‘But it *is* written on the bones of a cow!’ I cried.

“ ‘Even so,’ said he, ‘and therefore is his heresy the more damnable, and his punishment the more exemplary. Had it been indeed written on the bones of a camel, he might have affirmed what pleased him.’

“And I shook off the dust from my feet, and hastened to my dwelling. The rest of Abdallah’s acts thou knowest, and how he fell warring with the Carmathians. And now I ask thee, art thou yet minded to go forth as a missionary of the truth?”

“O Sergius,” said the young man, “I perceive that the temptations are greater, and the difficulties far surpassing what I had thought. Yet will I go, and I trust by Heaven’s grace not to fail utterly.”

“Then go,” said Sergius, “and Heaven’s blessing go with thee! Come back in ten years, should I be living, and if thou canst declare that thou hast forged no scriptures, and worked no miracles, and persecuted no unbelievers, and flattered no potentate, and bribed no one with the promise of aught in heaven or earth, I will give thee the philosopher’s stone.”