

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Suez

David Rich · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

This text, which is entitled “Suez,” is an excerpt from The Mirrored Palace by David Rich.

Ali leafed through the big volume of the *Thousand and One Nights* on his lap. When he stopped, he turned the book around and passed it on to me. The drawing was of a boy peeking around a curtain at a woman’s calf, bare to the knee, raised and held in a man’s hand.

“I would like to tell you... I was born into the Muzziana tribe. Bedouins. I never met my mother or my father, at least not to my knowledge. I was passed around, a slave from the time I could remember. Even taken to Cairo once and Alexandria where I learned how to rob the travelers getting off of ships. But while I was stealing, I was stolen and sold and ended up back in the desert with a band of Muzziana led by a very bad character named Gamil.

“I was twelve at the time. We were riding toward Suez — only a day away — where there would be many Hajjis to rob. A rider charged down a hill toward us. Swords were drawn and rifles raised but the rider did not slow down. Only a crazy man would attack in this way and we saw it was a Darwaysh so we all relaxed. He rode toward Gamil, and I rode right up to the Darwaysh and asked for bakhshish, thinking he dare not refuse in the face of so many weapons, but the Darwaysh said ‘Mafish.’ Nothing. Gamil liked that. I think it confirmed the Darwaysh’s craziness. Of course he asked the Darwaysh who he was, where he came from. I remember the reply very well because once I heard it, I vowed to become this man’s servant and leave behind this bunch of brigands.

“‘I am a travelling Darwaysh fulfilling my quest to visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah. I can lead you in prayers to heal your spirit or, as I am a doctor by training, I can heal your body from your eyeballs to the nails on your toes. I can fight and I can love and I can teach you, even you, to do either.’

“Gamil said, ‘You have no servant, Darwaysh.’

“‘Not at the moment, but you seem an unlikely man to want the job.’

“Gamil laughed and gave him the honor of riding with him at the front. When we camped, the Darwaysh told stories of home in Sind. Especially about the women there. I was captivated as you might imagine. Looking back, I should have known that this would only make Gamil and the others jealous of the Darwaysh.

“Suez was filled with beggars, thieves, confidence men who preyed on the hajjis and merchants

from all over who were waiting for ships to deliver them to Arabia. The caravan broke up. I snuck away and followed the Darwaysh until we were out of sight of the others. ‘Darwaysh, I want to be your servant,’ I said. ‘I’m a poor orphan and you must rescue me from these rascals who have kidnapped me to help in their nefarious plots and evil deeds. Only a man such as you, brave as the lion, strong as the ox, wise as the hawk can answer my prayers. Allow me to serve you, Darwaysh.’ I told him more of my life, of my travels, and of being sold and stolen.

“‘You tell me you’re a thief and spend your time in the company of conniving rascals which does not make me desire your company. Then you flatter me as if to make me a victim of my own vanity. If you desire to be my servant, give me reasons to hire you.’

“‘You’re going to the wrong office for your passport. You have to see the Bey first. Come, I’ll show you. I can do this and much more to smooth your journey. I, myself, have been a Hajji and my experience will be useful to you. And I’m an excellent cook.’

“‘I shall call you Ali Alf Aba — Ali of a Thousand Fathers. Well, then that’s settled and it seems I’ve been sent the perfect servant.’

“So I had a new name, which I cherished, and a new master, though I didn’t understand the meaning of his last statement until much later, after I’d learned his true identity. But I meant all the flattery. From the look in his eyes I could tell that I’d never met a person like the Darwaysh before. This was the beginning of life for me. I vowed to follow him and learn all I could. And my first lessons came rushing at me.

“We waited outside the Bey’s office in the sun with the other pilgrims for an hour before our turn came to wait in the tiny, crowded and hotter waiting room. The Darwaysh took great interest in the other applicants, even giving medical advice and being paid for it, too, which impressed me further. Just before it was the Darwaysh’s turn to see the Bey, a thin, weaselly sort of man, his hair matted with sweat and one ear disfigured by cuts, came in. He grumbled a bit about the closeness as he pushed his way onto the bench. Then he noticed the Darwaysh and his mouth fell open and a look of puzzlement came over him. The man stared as if in a trance. Just at that moment we were called inside to see the Bey. The Darwaysh never seemed to notice the little man.

“The Bey was a soft and lazy man, and mean spirited. A servant fanned him while he lay across his divan, periodically slurping something from a cup. The Darwaysh handed over his papers and the Bey took the most superficial glance and handed them back. He sipped his tea, smacked his lips and said that since the visa was issued in Alexandria it was invalid, the Darwaysh would have to return to Cairo and have it reissued. The Darwaysh said he had renewed it in Cairo. That was not good enough, though. It had to be reissued, not renewed. The Darwaysh stayed calm and asked the Bey to reissue it. By then the Bey was calling for the next applicant, but the Darwaysh did not move.

“A soldier escorted the next pilgrim in. The Darwaysh still did not move. The Bey looked away from him and gestured to the soldier to remove him. The Darwaysh said, ‘How long has your stomach bothered you? I’m a doctor.’ For a moment it looked like the Bey was considering whether to order the Darwaysh killed on the spot. ‘You’re drinking ginger tea, I can smell it, and it hasn’t helped. I have pills to give you relief,’ the Darwaysh said, still calm and direct.

“The Bey gestured angrily at the pilgrim and the soldier. ‘Get out of here now!’

“With some effort and many sighs the Bey rose and led us beyond the curtain into his living quarters. There the Darwaysh handed over three pills and the Bey took them. The Darwaysh placed a box full of the pills on the table along with his visa. ‘Take two pills a day and in one week you’ll feel like a young lion, again. My visa...’

“‘My wife... she has a pain in her leg.’

“The Darwaysh was firm: the visa. The Bey signed it and stamped it. Satisfied, the Darwaysh asked him to bring in his wife. She was taller than the Bey. All we could see of her behind the abaya and burka were her beautiful eyes which attached themselves to the Darwaysh. He met them and held them. She was hesitant to show her leg. The Darwaysh understood and asked the Bey to leave the room.

“‘Your wife is reluctant to have me examine her pain in your presence,’ the Darwaysh said.

“The Bey flashed angrily at the wife.

“‘If you don’t trust me, I’ll leave.’ The Darwaysh spoke softly, calmly but there was challenge in his voice and I could see that the Bey expected obsequiousness.

“The Bey regained his dignity by shooing me out through the curtain. He warned the Darwaysh not to be long and retired further into the residence. The office had been cleared out. I was alone. I stood on the bench and peeked around the curtain.

“The wife sat on the divan and her eyes followed the Darwaysh closely as he drew up a chair across from her and sat. He asked her where the pain was and when it came. His eyes never left hers. It seemed that the clock ticked forever before she finally touched a spot on her calf. The Darwaysh put out his hand. The wife nodded ever so slightly. Her assent, it was. But her eyes never left his. The Darwaysh gently slid his hand behind her calf and lifted it toward him. The abaya draped back a bit revealing her ankle. The Darwaysh lifted the sandal from her foot. Their eyes stayed locked together. It was like a dance, a dance while still so every little movement became thrilling. I was only twelve, remember!

“Gently, ever so gently and slowly, the Darwaysh slipped the abaya up, exposing her calf. He ran his finger along the soft curve of her lower leg, up to the under side of her knee. He paused there, paused his hand and his eyes never left hers. Would he go higher? Dare he? I was afraid for him, afraid the Bey would burst in. At last, the Darwaysh, moved his hand lower. Quietly, he said, ‘Does it hurt here?’

“The wife gasped at the sound of his voice breaking the spell. The Darwaysh’s lips curled in a smile. His hand applied a slight pressure and the wife squirmed, just a bit. Just as quickly, she looked away and the Darwaysh understood. He pulled the abaya down to cover her leg, but he held on for one long, tender moment before setting her foot down.

“‘I will give you oil to rub on the spot,’ he said and rose just as the Bey entered. The Darwaysh handed the oil to the Bey. ‘For your wife,’ he said. ‘No charge.’

“What magic was it? I wanted to ask the Darwaysh but didn’t know what to say. That was only the beginning of my education. We found lodging in a filthy room where goats would wander in — and out, they didn’t like it much — and the flies were awful. I was never someone who liked being

indoors. Still don't. But Suez was dangerous and those who stayed in the alleys were robbed, or worse. I hardly slept for fear Gamil's men would come to kill the Darwaysh and take me away again. At night I saw the Darwaysh writing in a book he kept hidden inside his robes. I warned him to be careful. If he was found out, people would suspect him for a spy. He thanked me for my concern, but he kept on writing. We spent two nights there waiting for the ship to Yenbo.

"We were on our way to the market square when Gamil and two of his comrades, very mean men they were, came out of an alley and fell in behind us. The Darwaysh put his hand on my shoulder which is all that kept me from fleeing. A moment later we heard the cries, 'Stop them! Stop them, I've been robbed!' A young man ran from the alley begging anyone for help. The Darwaysh turned to face Gamil and his men. I wanted to run and wanted the Darwaysh to run because I knew what Gamil could do if someone opposed him. But as he approached, the Darwaysh held out his cup. 'A portion for the poor,' he said.

"Gamil said, 'Move aside. I should charge you for riding with us.'

"It's bad luck to refuse.'

"It's bad luck to refuse a Darwaysh, but how do I know you are one? You say you're a Pathan, but how do I know. How do I know you're a doctor?"

"I think your bad luck is about to begin,' the Darwaysh said.

"Gamil turned his attention to me. 'Ali, I have always treated you well. It is I who freed you. I who let you ride with us and fed you and even gave you a share of our booty. You would be wise to abandon this stranger now. It will not go well for him or for anyone who is with him. Come over here, Ali.'

"A crowd formed. I was very scared. I had seen many times how vicious and cruel Gamil could be. Certainly, when he was done with the Darwaysh he would kill me. But I understood, too, that he was going to punish me cruelly if I came over to him. He only wanted that to weaken the Darwaysh. Gamil did not care for me. He could steal other boys. Even by that age, I had taken many gambles and been lucky most of the times, but this was the most dangerous gamble of all. The Darwaysh smiled at me. It was as if he knew my mind and was careful not influence me one way or another. I stayed put.

The two thieves moved close behind the Darwaysh and then everything happened in a blur. The Darwaysh spun and snatched the sword from the scabbard of one of the thieves and pulled his own dagger with his other hand — all in one motion. He hit the thief on the head with the face of the sword and the thief lost his balance and fell to his knees. The Darwaysh elbowed the other thief in his windpipe, crunching it. The sound was like a walnut being cracked. I can still hear it. Gamil had his dagger in hand, but the Darwaysh slashed and Gamil dropped it. They faced each other. Gamil still had a pistol in his belt. The Darwaysh moved sideways so he could see the two thieves.

"I'm a religious man so I'm going to tell you the truth,' the Darwaysh said. 'You have no chance of pulling that pistol and firing it before I slash your hand, possibly cutting it off because this sword looks sharp. But then, you don't believe anything I say, so, it seems, you'll have to try it.'

One of the thieves began to get up. The Darwaysh kicked him in the head and quickly turned on Gamil and slashed his hand as he was attempting to pull his pistol. Gamil screamed at the pain. The

Darwaysh put the sword at his throat.

“Is it still attached? You are a fortunate man. Now, to prove that I’m a doctor, I’ll cut you open and as I remove each organ I’ll explain its function. Ready?”

“Gamil was sweating with fear. He swore to Allah that he believed the Darwaysh was a holy man and a Pathan and a doctor. The Darwaysh told him to return the purse to the young man with glasses and Gamil did so immediately. The Darwaysh removed the sword from Gamil’s neck. Gamil jumped up and ran away. I knew then the Darwaysh was the greatest man I had ever met or would meet and I knew that this was the greatest day of my life. The crowd seemed paralyzed in awe. I guided the Darwaysh through them toward the ticketing office. The young man who was robbed caught up with us.

“Thank you, Darwaysh,” he said. ‘You saved me and I will pay you back forever, however I can. Omar Barzouki is my name. From Cairo.’ I got my first good look at him. He was short and soft, puffy. His hair was cut short and oiled neatly. I understood why Gamil and his men chose him. He offered up a handful of coins and the Darwaysh accepted them.

“You would have been safer staying in Cairo, it seems.’

“Life is adventure, they say. Have you booked passage on the Golden Thread?”

“We are on our way to do that right now.’

“Marvelous! Then we shall travel together and become close friends. From dire circumstances come great opportunities. But I must ask you first — do you know that little man who is following us?”

“It was the weaselly man from the Bey’s office. The Darwaysh and Barzouki said Alhamdulillah and they would meet again on board the Golden Thread. I followed the Darwaysh down a narrow lane and into a stall selling leather goods. First he checked to make sure Barzouki wasn’t lurking about and when the weaselly man came along, the Darwaysh intercepted him.

“Are you sick, friend?” he said. The man said he wasn’t ill. ‘Perhaps it’s spiritual comfort you seek,’ the Darwaysh said. The weaselly man was relaxed and smiling. He was going on the Hajj for that purpose. ‘I’m asking why you’re following me,’ the Darwaysh said.

“The Weasley man seemed pleased by the question. ‘Oh, that’s because I knew you before... In Persia... You were English then. My name is Faris, by the way.’

The Darwaysh moved closer to Faris, towering over him. He took hold of the front of Faris’s shirt but not so roughly as to draw attention. ‘You saw what I did to the thief who doubted me?’

“I meant no offense. I have information which could bring you unbearable anguish, or unending delight.’

“Faris seemed sincere. He wasn’t like Gamil. There was no challenge in him. And the Darwaysh understood that. He spoke softly but in a way that was very firm. ‘You’re mistaken. Do not bother me again or you’ll face the consequences.’

“Faris just shrugged as if nothing had happened and walked away. I waited to see where we would

go next. I was overwhelmed with joy at all the adventure and mystery of my new life. I told the Darwaysh that as part of my wages he must teach me all he knows.

“‘You may learn all you can,’ he said.’

“‘Including how to fight.’

“‘Including how to pray.’

And we proceeded to the mosque.

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