

The Arabian epic
Heroic and oral story-telling
Volume 3: Texts

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Kitāb Qiṣṣat al-Muqaddam ‘Alī al-Zaibaq

(1)

‘Alī was one of those who ‘guarded Baghdad, Egypt and the other lands and were proverbial for their cleverness’.

The story starts with the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd going out at night in Baghdad disguised as a dervish, accompanied by his vizier, Ja‘far, and his servant, Masrūr. They find a wounded youth, whose cure Ja‘far is ordered to accomplish within forty days, on pain of execution. Ja‘far has him removed by a porter and on the thirty-eighth day he is successfully treated by a Maghribī doctor.

(2)

On his recovery, the youth tells Hārūn that he is Ardashīr, son of Hārūn’s friend, Bābak, the king of Isfahan, who had had no son until he was sixty years old. He had had a conventional education, being trained by ‘a brave man’ in the arts of war, but he had been distracted from affairs of state by a passion for hunting. Bābak had been advised to ‘fetter him, that is, marry him’.

Ardashīr had at first told his father that he did not want a wife, but he had then fallen in love with a girl whom he saw in a dream. An old woman, who sells ‘gold, jewellery, silver and diamonds’, tracked down the girl, who turned out to be Sāra, the daughter of Bābak’s Jewish banker.

(3)

Ardashīr was smuggled into Sāra’s room in a chest, but on being invited by her to sleep with her, he pointed out that she was a Jewess, at which she was converted to Islam. The two then decided to go to be married in Baghdad, and during their journey the old woman was killed by Ardashīr.

They arrived at Baghdad when the gates were locked, and it was at this point that Ardashīr was attacked and wounded. It turns out that Sāra has disappeared, and Ja‘far is given three days in which to solve the crime.

A ‘youth’ shows him where Sāra is being held by an agent sent by her father. She is released and the ‘youth’ now turns out to be Dalīla, the daughter of Hārūn’s former police chief, Muḥammad Abū Silāḥ, who had died of anger after being replaced by Aḥmad al-Danaf. It was she who had earlier disguised herself as the porter and as the Maghribī doctor.

(4)

The story now turns to Kaukab Nār, the daughter of Chosroe. Hārūn, again in disguise, has seen a beautiful woman at the door of a mosque. On being brought to him, she tells him her name, explaining that she had first been kidnapped by the associates of a slave named Raiḥān, with whom she had been brought up. She had been saved from rape by a peasant, who had taken her to Baghdad, intending to marry her, and it was he who had left her at the mosque while he went off to find a lodging.

The peasant is promptly killed by Masrūr, and Ḥasan, who says that he wants to marry Kaukab himself, provides her with a dowry and with an elderly chaperone.

The story of Kaukab is interrupted by a complaint brought to Hārūn by Ḥasan al-Ḥā’ik, who has married Fāṭima, the daughter of al-Khwāja Muṣṭafā. Ḥasan has had to rebuild a wall separating his property from that of his evil neighbour, Ibrāhīm, who has unsuccessfully tried to seduce his wife. During the building work, a treasure was found, which Ibrāhīm kept for himself. On Ḥasan’s complaint, he is executed.

The treasure is given by Hārūn to Kaukab, who, in turn, sends it to ‘Alī al-Jauharī, in return for a drink of lemonade that he gave her when she was suffering from thirst. Hārūn, on learning of this, orders ‘Alī’s execution, but a substitute is killed by Ja’far, and, after the true story has been uncovered, ‘Alī is married to Kaukab, while Hārūn ‘took her sister, who turns out to be the girl whom he had seen at the mosque’.

After the wedding, ‘Alī is discovered as a headless corpse, while Kaukab has vanished. Ja’far, who is again given three days to solve the crime, turns for help to Dalīla, who recovers Kaukab and ‘Alī from agents sent by Kaukab’s father, Chosroe, who had killed a slave and left his body to be mistaken for that of ‘Alī.

(5)

Dalīla now drugs Hārūn and steals a hundred sheets of paper which she stamps with his seal. She uses these to exile her rival, Aḥmad al-Danaf, and to tell the authorities throughout the ‘Abbāsīd empire that his life is forfeit.

After some adventures, Aḥmad arrives in Cairo, where he finds shelter with a woman named Ayesha, but where the wily Ḥasan al-Shūmān commits a series of thefts and lays the blame on him.

Attempts are made by the Cairene police chief, Ṣalāḥ, to trap the thief, in one of which he uses a Jewish sand-diviner who has a mark made on Ḥasan’s door. Ḥasan, however, marks all the doors in the quarter in the same way, which leads Ṣalāḥ mistakenly to raid the house of the mufti. The Jew is killed, but Ḥasan twice falls into difficulties and has to be rescued, once by Aḥmad himself.

The narrative now introduces Muḥammad b. al-Bannān, a youth ‘unique in his beauty’, who had been kept in the harem ‘for fear of people’s eyes’. He admires Aḥmad, is taught the tricks of his trade by him, and is then sent off to steal provisions for a celebration, by way of a test.

After some further adventures, Aḥmad returns to Baghdad, leaving Muḥammad as the constant opponent of Ṣalāḥ, the police chief.

(6)

The money of a visiting Syrian merchant is recovered for him by Muḥammad from a blind thief, who has claimed it for his own after hearing a description of the bag in

which it was kept. He goes, in disguise, with the merchant to Damascus, where he hears Ḥasan al-Sukkārī, the lieutenant of the Damascene police chief, boasting that he intends to visit Cairo to play a trick on him. In fact, Ḥasan falls into difficulties and has to be rescued by Muḥammad.

Muḥammad, in disguise, now joins Ḥasan, pretending to be one of his father's mamluks. They are involved in an adventure with a visiting Genoese prince, who, after seeing Ḥasan's wife at a window, has her kidnapped and placed on board his ship. She is rescued after Muḥammad has followed her to Genoa, and she tells him: 'this is not the action of a mamluk but of a hero'.

There is some confusion in the account of the events that follow. Muḥammad eventually reveals himself to Ḥasan and sends him back with gifts to Damascus, rejoining him disguised as a groom. In Damascus Ḥasan boasts that he overcame Muḥammad, and Muḥammad, in his disguise as groom, tells a rambling story about al-Mahdī and the shaikh of a group of people who dress warmly in summer and coolly in winter, when they fan themselves. At the end of this he reveals his identity.

(7)

Aḥmad al-Danaf now moves to Alexandria and the narrative introduces another Ḥasan, Ra's al-Ghūl, together with the formidable Fāṭima, daughter of the qāḍī Nūr al-Dīn of the Fayyūm. Fāṭima having been struck by her brothers, who were thieves, had disguised herself as a bedouin, robbed them, and then moved to Cairo, where she meets and fatally wounds Muḥammad. He tells her that he had been warned of this in a dream and asks her to take his name, lest his fame perish.

Fāṭima is now told by the Lady Zainab in a dream that she is destined to marry Ḥasan Ra's al-Ghūl and to produce a famous son. On meeting Ḥasan, however, she tells him that she will not marry him until he has taken the place of Ṣalāḥ. He quickly achieves this by rescuing al-'Azīz, the ruler of Egypt, from a band of Persians who have been sent to Cairo by Dalīla.

Al-'Azīz now tells Fāṭima's father to marry her to Ḥasan, which he is at first reluctant to do – 'I have no daughter' – but this is because he considers her to be 'a calamity of calamities'. Her wedding night is spent in a duel with her bridegroom, which she proposes to continue for the next three nights. Ḥasan, however, drugs and deflowers her, but is told that she will not allow him to lie with her again for nine months.

(8)

Ṣalāḥ schemes against Ḥasan and manages to have him poisoned by a slave-girl. He dies after telling Fāṭima, who is pregnant, that she must order her child to avenge him. Ṣalāḥ attends his funeral, having rubbed his eyes with onion, and is then reappointed to his post.

After spending twenty days by Ḥasan's grave, Fāṭima moves to a cave where she gives birth to a boy. The baby is immediately removed by jinn, one of whose queens had been told by a soothsayer that her daughter would be rescued by him. He is returned after an hour with a splendid robe and a jewelled necklace, his body gleaming with what appears to be quicksilver. It was because of this that he was called 'Alī al-Zaībaq ('Mercury 'Alī').

(9)

After being reared on the milk of a lioness, 'Alī is sent to a school, where he plays a series of tricks, stealing cream, pretending to be ill, leading his master to fall into a well, and causing a quarrel between him and his wife. He is eventually found to be able to recite the whole of the Quran without being able to read.

He now serves a series of apprenticeships, each of which ends disastrously. He collects a band of boys, learns to fight and to drink, and has a series of encounters with Ṣalāḥ.

The Lady Zainab appears in a dream to Fāṭima telling her to send 'Alī to Aḥmad al-Danaf in Alexandria. He goes, accompanied by Salīm al-'Abd, a slave whom his father had freed. After a series of tests including an encounter with an *'ifrit*, who disappears into a well when he calls on Zainab, and an ambush by one of Aḥmad's men, Aḥmad agrees to teach him. His course ends with further tests involving his ability as a thief and ending when he sees through Aḥmad's disguise as a dervish.

(10)

On his return to Cairo, he plays a number of tricks on Ṣalāḥ, disguising himself as a peasant, a girl, and a Jewish doctor, in which latter role he produces a prescription that is a faecal variant of the kill-bearer letter. He then steals a robe, leaving Ṣalāḥ 'almost exploding with rage'.

In the course of his campaign, he again gets the better of Ṣalāḥ, who is arrested as a robber and is about to have his hand cut off when he reveals who he is. The paederastic prefect is involved in the plots and is discomfited, and Ṣalāḥ is involved in further humiliations, after one of which, in an incomplete episode, he pretends to have died. 'Alī and Salīm dress as the angels Munkir and Nākir who interrogate the dead.

'Alī now joins forces with his uncle, whom he has found sleeping with his head in his mother's lap. They raid the palace of al-'Azīz and when his uncle is trapped there, 'Alī, on his instructions, cuts off his head. Ṣalāḥ tries to identify the dead man's associates, but is again defeated and this time loses his son, whom 'Alī kills.

(11)

'Alī now comes to court and asks for Ṣalāḥ's post. He is challenged to perform a number of tasks, during one of which he rescues the jinn princess, Saisabān, who is being held captive by a *mārid*.

The grateful princess takes him to visit her father, the White King of the jinn, in the Mountains of the Moon, where she tells him to ask for the robe of Damar b. Saif. He is then seized by a Magian *mārid*, who tells him not to mention the name of God, and he is saved from execution by the White King's rival, the Red King, on the advice of a crypto-Muslim vizier. He is then rescued, given Damar's robe, and returned to Cairo, where Ṣalāḥ thinks that he must have died. Ṣalāḥ is again discomfited, being suspended at a height of fifty cubits in al-'Azīz's court.

On Ṣalāḥ's prompting, al-'Azīz sends 'Alī on a quest to steal a crystal box, made by five philosopher kings, from a city guarded by warning devices at nine months' distance from Egypt.

On his way he is intercepted by two of Ṣalāḥ's men. Ṣalāḥ's daughter Fitna, with whom they are in love, has asked for his head by way of a dowry. He cuts off their ears.

He now rescues the daughter of Bandar Khān, who holds the treasure that he is seeking. She has been kidnapped and is being held in a cave by an agent sent with forty followers by Tījān, a suitor who had been rejected on the grounds that he was a worshipper of Saturn. 'Alī returns the princess to her palace and then rescues another Egyptian, also called 'Alī, who is about to be executed.

In gratitude for the rescue of his daughter, Bandar Khān guides him and the second 'Alī through the traps that guard the treasure. These include forty steps, of which only those coloured white or yellow are safe, as well as swords, lions, mechanical men and a sea of quicksilver. He is given a bridle of brass with which to control a horse that takes him to a mountain beneath which there is a boiling spring. At this point Zainab helps the two of them through another series of traps and returns them to Bandar's city after they have found themselves stranded without provisions.

On their return they find that the city is being attacked by the princess's rejected suitor, Tījān. The two of them kidnap Tījān and after 'Alī has killed his vizier in battle next day, his army flees and the two 'Alīs are then sent back to Egypt.

(12)

Ṣalāḥ has meanwhile 'opened a shop' in which 'Alī al-Zaibaq is drugged, but his mother, Fāṭima who has been working there in disguise, rescues him and the episode is repeated in a second shop and with a group of bedouin, whose shaikh turns out to be Ṣalāḥ himself. He has told his 'wife' to poison 'Alī, but the 'wife' again turns out to be Fāṭima.

'Alī falls once more into Ṣalāḥ's hands and is rescued this time by the second 'Alī, who has pretended to want to kill him. The Cairenes welcome his return with a procession and he is appointed as chief of police.

(13)

In exchange for the treasure that 'Alī has brought, Hārūn is asked to restore Aḥmad al-Danaf to his post in Baghdad. This angers Dalīla.

'Alī meanwhile is tricked and drugged by a third 'Alī, al-Basaṭī, who has fallen in love with Ṣalāḥ's daughter, Nādīra, and has been asked by her father for 'Alī's head as her dowry. Fāṭima, masquerading as Ṣalāḥ, rescues her son, and al-Basaṭī, after being beaten, joins his service.

Al-Basaṭī is soon involved in a complicated adventure in which he rescues a girl who is being assaulted by an emir, is accused of a theft and then freed from prison by the real thief. The thief later tells his story, and the difficulties that he has been facing in an attempt to marry a girl who is betrothed to someone else are resolved by al-'Azīz. The episode ends with his marriage.

(14)

Dalīla has sent one of her followers to collect the annual 'tribute' that she has been in the habit of receiving from Ṣalāḥ. On hearing of his replacement, she sends a letter to 'Alī, but Ṣalāḥ alters this, inserting an accusation that al-'Azīz is 'Alī's lover, which causes him to cut off the messenger's ear.

Dalīla now comes to Cairo herself, after Aḥmad al-Danaf has offered to resign from his reacquired post if she manages to get the better of 'Alī, making it a condition that he must be allowed, once, to see her real face. She poses as an old woman whose chickens

have escaped into ‘Alī’s courtyard, but this apparently is not enough to fulfil the condition.

Her subsequent adventures in Cairo are given in a garbled form in the printed text. The first involves the temporary kidnapping of a boy, from whom a valuable ornament is stolen and for whom the headless corpse of a child is substituted.

In the second adventure, Dalīla kills a soothsayer, Ṣāliḥa, and disguised as her, she ‘sells’ ‘Alī, whom she pretends to be helping, to the wife of an emir.

She now tricks a childless wife into believing that she has a mad son who can impregnate her. She involves a lascivious butcher and a youth called Ḥasan in the plot, and she tells ‘Alī that the woman is her own daughter and is desperately in love with him. He eventually realises that he has been duped, but not before Dalīla has stolen money, clothes and a donkey. The donkey’s owner finds her, but she tricks a barber into pulling out his teeth, saying that this is the only cure for his madness, which takes the form of an obsession with a donkey.

‘Alī thinks that Dalīla must be staying with Ṣalāḥ. He fails to track her down, but recovers the stolen goods except for his own clothes. He finds a note challenging him to come to Baghdad if he wants them back. Against ‘Alī’s advice, Ṣalāḥ is hanged for sheltering thieves.

(15)

‘Alī now disguises himself and joins a caravan, which he saves both from a lion and from a band of bedouin plunderers. On his arrival at Damascus he is drugged by Dalīla, posing as a coffee-seller, but then rescued by his mother.

The young Ibn al-Maghribī had been appointed to his father’s post as police chief of Damascus, but had then been deposed in favour of the more experienced Aḥmad al-Ayyād. Complaints and counter-complaints have been made about the bedouin attack on the caravan and, as Aḥmad denies responsibility for what happens outside the city, Ibn al-Maghribī is ordered to bring in the bedouin. ‘Alī helps to kidnap their chief, and although he is freed by Dalīla, Fāṭima recaptures him and Ibn al-Maghribī is reappointed to his post.

Dalīla’s part, if any, in the next adventure is not made clear. ‘Alī meets an old woman whom he takes to the house of a Christian. Next day the Christian complains that his children have been killed, while the old woman has vanished. In fact, her body is later found in his house, the assumption presumably being that she and the children had been killed by Dalīla in the hope that ‘Alī would be held responsible.

Dalīla now forges a letter from the Caliph ordering ‘Alī’s execution and when she is told that ‘he left a long time ago’, she says: ‘I shall go and tell the king [*sic*] that ‘the ruler of Syria disobeys your commands.’

She now makes a mistake and kills the wrong man, but still thinking him to be ‘Alī, she has the head tanned, stuffed with straw and given glass eyes. ‘Alī himself is the tanner and later, disguised as a perfume seller, he provides her with henna that makes her hair fall out.

(16)

A series of captures and rescues follow. Dalīla disguises herself as a coffee-seller and then as a Kurdish horseman. She uses a loaf of bread left by a corpse to drug him and

then kills an elderly couple and two children in order to accuse him of murder. He is drugged again by a gold piece which Dalīla, disguised as a blind man, has already put in her mouth. In every case he is rescued by his mother.

The police chief of Hama, on Dalīla's prompting, provides forty men who pretend to ask him to arbitrate in a dispute over a stolen chest. On opening the chest, he is again drugged, only to be rescued later, again by his mother, who, disguised as an old man, has pretended to want to kill him to avenge 'his' brother.

'Alī is drugged thrice more before reaching the Euphrates, where he hires an inflated skin on which to cross. This sinks, presumably having been holed by Dalīla, but as 'all Egyptians can swim', he escapes. Dalīla makes a final attempt to drug him, disguised as a Bedouin emir, and after Fāṭima has again saved him, she returns to Baghdad, fastens his picture to the city gate and posts men to intercept him.

(17)

After entering the city in disguise, he is invited to the home of a Jew, who turns out to be his mother. He wants to visit Aḥmad al-Danaf, but is warned by his mother that no one will direct him. With difficulty, however, he finds his way and Aḥmad reproaches him for having allowed Dalīla to return with his robe. This is on display at Khān al-Jawhārī and Dalīla's men who are guarding it claim that their mistress cut off 'Alī's whiskers. 'Alī attacks, but the robe is removed by Dalīla's daughter Zainab, who falls in love on seeing him.

The matter is taken to Hārūn al-Rashīd, who, together with the vizier Ja'far, is inspired with love for 'Alī, while the qadi and the mufti hate him. Hārūn says that 'Alī was wrong to try to recover by force what had been taken by a trick. 'Alī complains that Dalīla had not kept to the conditions of the contest and he produces a signed statement to this effect from al-'Azīz, which Dalīla counters with a forgery. It is eventually decided that 'Alī is to try to recover the robe by trickery.

He uses twenty disguises, but suffers a series of failures until he manages to drug a black man who is living in Dalīla's *khān* and who carries mail for merchants to and from Basra. This man eventually agrees to help him and, in his guise, he enters the *khān*. Dalīla recognises him, but the merchant in charge of the *khān* refuses to believe her, because of the knowledge that 'Alī shows of his supposed family, with whom he is seen playing.

The *khān* is guarded by dogs on the roof and in the courtyard as well as by armed men, but Fāṭima disguised as the gate-keeper poisons the dogs and drugs the men. She guides 'Alī past a series of traps, including lance points that shoot out of a door, a twenty-fathom well, and an alarm bell.

The robe is being worn by Zainab, who is lying in a bed suspended from the ceiling of her room. She pretends to be asleep and when 'Alī slips off the robe 'she made herself not feel'. He then rejoins his mother, who tells him that the girl would have killed him had he kissed her.

Next morning Dalīla gets up without performing the prayer, 'as she was a Magian who worshipped fire'. She finds a note in Zainab's bed to say that 'Alī had taken the robe and could have taken her virtue had he not been a man of honour. She says that she will accuse him of rape, to the consternation of Zainab who says: 'are you going to put me to shame because of your games?'

Hārūn ‘loved Zainab’ and ‘Alī is warned: ‘if it is true, flee to Egypt’. Zainab’s virginity is confirmed, in spite of her mother’s efforts, and ‘Alī proposes a new contest on condition that there is to be no ‘killing or blood’, and that he be allowed to see Dalīla’s true face.

(18)

In the first round of this contest, ‘Alī is trapped in a well, where the disguised Zainab pretends to have dropped a bangle. He is rescued by a thief, Ḥasan al-Khaṭṭāf, who steals clothes for him to replace the robe that Zainab has taken and who then steals a mule from the renowned mathematician, Ibrāhīm. ‘Alī tells his mother what has happened, saying that he would give his life for the recovery of the robe. She promptly produces it, having disguised herself as Dalīla and been given it by Zainab. ‘Alī recompenses the owners of the clothes and of the mule.

Dalīla now tries to trap him by disguising Zainab as a slave-girl and having her sold in the market. She recognises ‘Alī, who is disguised as a white-bearded Baghdadi merchant, but he manages to drug her. He then ‘stretches out his hand’ to Zainab, but she appeals to his honour and he releases her. He takes Dalīla in a chest to Hārūn’s court and, still pretending to be a merchant, tells his story and asks whether he can take the ‘slave-girl’ as his concubine. The mufti agrees that this is legal, but he is contradicted by the qadi after the true story has been told. Hārūn spits in Dalīla’s face, but Zainab’s virginity has to be tested again, as Hārūn intends to have ‘Alī killed if he has slept with her.

(19)

‘Alī asks Hārūn to confirm that the contest must be between him and Dalīla alone, after which Zainab is removed to the caliph’s harem. ‘Alī, disguised as a beautiful young woman, then finds Dalīla in the shop of her associate, al-Khwāja Maḥmūd, and cheats her out of some valuable goods. After a quarrel, Dalīla seizes ‘her’ and ‘she’ falls on top of ‘her’ child, which is then found to be dead. Dalīla is condemned to death by Hārūn, but both she and ‘Alī then reveal themselves. Dalīla accuses ‘Alī of having strangled the child, but it turns out that he had bought a corpse.

An accident causes ‘Alī to fall out of favour. He has intervened in a quarrel during which he beats the son of the qadi, who has struck an old man who fell in front of his mule. Even Ja‘far agrees that he was in the wrong and that he should simply have lodged a complaint.

Fāṭīma dressed as a slave-girl, is sold by ‘Alī, disguised as an old Indian merchant, to Hārūn. He himself, now disguised as a handsome youth, takes refuge with the qadi, claiming to have been falsely accused of gambling away his master’s money. Both the qadi and the mufti are pederasts; ‘Alī first persuades the qadi to produce wine, after which he beats him, and he then goes to the mufti, whom he drugs. Fāṭīma in the meanwhile, has drugged first Hārūn himself, then Ja‘far, and then Dalīla, whom she puts in a chest which is delivered to the court. Notes are left with the other four victims to say that it was ‘Alī who tricked them.

‘Alī’s next disguise is that of a Persian merchant, who asks Dalīla, herself disguised as a broker, to help him with a treasure chest. She sells him Zainab as a ‘mamluk’, and prepares a drugged meal, but he himself drugs both of them. Zainab is later returned to Hārūn’s harem.

(20)

In the subsequent adventure 'Alī becomes head of a Sufi monastery, whose prosperity he has restored by pretending to produce gold by alchemy. In fact, he and his mother have used their own funds. Dalīla and her brother Zuraiq hear of this and agree to serve 'Alī in return for his secret. Hārūn, Ja'far and Masrūr also arrive in disguise but reveal their names, telling 'Alī, whom they have failed to recognise, to come to the court to demonstrate his powers. He is carried there by Dalīla and Zuraiq, whom he then drugs.

Zuraiq foils a number of attempts by 'Alī to break into his shop, but 'Alī eventually succeeds, having been disguised by his mother as a pregnant bedouin girl. He steals Zuraiq's money-box, which is later returned in Hārūn's presence, but it is then stolen a second time after 'Alī has been found apparently dead and Zuraiq has gone to dig a grave for him.

A third attempt to steal the box, which has now been buried in Zuraiq's courtyard, fails when 'Alī is trapped in a pit. On this occasion he is rescued by the jinn princess, Saisabān, who then removes Zuraiq's son. Fāṭima disguised as a soothsayer, gets money from Zuraiq's wife to find what has happened and the box is again stolen. Zuraiq complains to Hārūn that there was to be no bloodshed, and his son is returned. He now resigns from what he had claimed as his share in his sister's office.

Fāṭima, having got herself sold as a slave-girl to Dalīla, cooks her a meal that drives her mad – 'she dances and sings and looks at the floor of the room, at times laughing and at times weeping'. Later, disguised as Dalīla, she goes to Hārūn to say that she wants to resign in 'Alī's favour and that she is abandoning worldly things. Dalīla herself, on being restored to sanity, is forced to accept this resignation, but on 'Alī's instructions, her property is restored to her. 'Alī is now appointed as police-chief, with Ḥasan al-Khaṭṭāf acting as his lieutenant.

(21)

Dalīla approaches the police-chief of Basra, 'Alī b. Wajh al-Faras, whose request for Zainab's hand she had earlier rejected. She accuses 'Alī al-Zaibaq of sleeping with the qadi and promises his rival Zainab's hand in return for 'Alī's life.

'Alī b. Wajh al-Faras goes to Baghdad and strikes down 'Alī al-Zaibaq, but later leaves after hearing of his high reputation. On his way back he rescues Nuzhat al-Zamān, the daughter of the lord of Basra, who is being attacked by a slave with whom she had been brought up as a little girl. In gratitude she gives him jewels, but makes a mistake in her choice, taking out ones that belong to Hārūn's wife, Zubaida. 'Alī passes these to his nephews, who are arrested when they try to sell them, and, rather than compromise Nuzhat al-Zamān, he himself returns to Baghdad and takes refuge with 'Alī al-Zaibaq, who has said: 'I would protect you even were you 'Alī b. Wajh al-Faras.' 'Alī al-Zaibaq solves the problem by having everyone involved brought to Baghdad, where the true story is revealed and accepted. It is agreed that Nuzhat al-Zamān should be married to her rescuer.

(22)

Difficulties are caused for 'Alī by his lack of funds, which means that he cannot give his men what they used to receive from Dalīla. Fāṭima puts luminous paint on her face and goes by night to the qadi and to Ja'far, claiming to be the Lady Zainab and threatening

them with death if they do not help ‘Alī. A festival is then organised by ‘Alī, the expenses being covered by Hārūn. Zubaida sends Zainab, Dalīla’s daughter, to bring him money and a robe of honour, and he falls in love on seeing her again.

Aḥmad al-Danaf asks that Hārūn arrange a marriage between them, but Zainab, on her mother’s prompting, asks for the crown of Chosroe and the caftan of Ezra by way of dowry.

The crown is kept in the city of Tawriz and is only brought out at the festival of Nairūz. Fāṭima goes there before him, kills a paederastic innkeeper, takes his place and gives her son lodging. He is later brought to the palace as a supposed eunuch and after Fāṭima has killed the only servant who has access to the crown they escape with their booty.

On his way home ‘Alī, who has been left by Fāṭima is trapped in a cave. He is rescued by Saisabān, who leaves him near Baghdad, where he finds Fāṭima disguised as a gardener. The crown is given to Zainab, who hands it over to Hārūn.

‘Alī now leaves to fetch the caftan, but because of a quarrel Fāṭima abandons him and returns to Cairo. ‘Alī himself, disguised as a Syrian Jew, is taken into the service of Ezra in Tiberias. Here he kills a snake, but finds the room filling with blood. Ezra then appears and turns him into a donkey, which he gives to Ya‘qūb the water-carrier. Aḥmad al-Danaf and ten of his men follow him to Tiberias, but are themselves turned into donkeys.

The Lady Zainab appears in a dream to Fāṭima, warns her of ‘Alī’s danger and gives her a palm branch, with which she later kills Ezra. The townspeople attack her, but Ya‘qūb’s sorceress daughter, Sāra, who has known by divination what was happening, restores ‘Alī and the others to their human shapes and the people ask for quarter. Sāra now helps ‘Alī to find the caftan, and Ya‘qūb is left as ruler of Tiberias.

One of Dalīla’s agents steals the caftan, only to lose it again to Fāṭima. Arrangements are made for the wedding, but during the bridal procession the same agent strikes at ‘Alī and wounds him, before himself being killed. The delay is only temporary; ‘Alī is cured of his wound and the marriage takes place.

(23)

Dalīla now tells Hārūn that she wants to make the pilgrimage. On reaching Damascus she feigns illness, and leaving a substitute, she secretly returns to Baghdad where she steals all the treasures that ‘Alī has brought to Hārūn. ‘Alī fails to meet the deadline that Hārūn sets for their recovery and is about to be executed when Dalīla returns and intercedes for him.

Dalīla then goes to Tawriz, where ‘Alī, having followed her, finds her being led in chains. He is then trapped in a concealed pit as he tries to rescue her from her prison, and as this has all been a trick on her part she now wants to have him killed. Chosroe, however, is cautioned by his viziers of danger from ‘Alī’s supporters, ‘whom we fear’. In fact, Aḥmad al-Danaf brings up thirty-nine men, who kill the Priest of the Fire and a number of his followers, whose disguise they assume. The plan fails, however, and they are imprisoned with ‘Alī.

At Dalīla’s instigation, Chosroe now sets out to attack Baghdad, leaving his son in charge of Tawriz. Fāṭima, again alerted by the Lady Zainab, approaches Ardashir of

Isfahan, who agrees to move against Tawriz. His force pretends to be bringing back prisoners and is allowed to enter the city, which is captured. 'Alī and the others are then freed.

In the meanwhile, Hārūn's army has been defeated and driven into Baghdad. Dalīla enters, pretending to have been held captive in Tawriz, but she then kidnaps him and hands him over to Chosroe. Chosroe is advised to postpone his execution, but Dalīla poisons the guards who are to take him back to Tawriz. She takes him to a cave and is about to kill him herself when she is struck down by Fāṭima. Chosroe is then kidnapped in his turn, but spared after having promised never to attack the Arabs again. Shortly afterwards Dalīla is hanged in view of Hārūn and the court.

(24)

'Alī, who is now apparently without a rival, has two sons by Zainab. When the eldest is five, they both disappear and one is later found hanged, with a note to say that this is the work of Dalīla. It turns out that it was her double who had been killed, and after biding her time she had tried to kill both her own daughter and 'Alī's sons. Of these, however, the younger, Aḥmad, had vanished.

Dalīla now goes to Rūmat al-Madā'in, where she strangles the Patriarch and assumes his shape. She preaches a crusading sermon, inciting the ruler, Rūmān al-Azraq, to march on Baghdad. His army is getting the worse of an encounter with Hārūn, when Hārūn is kidnapped by Dalīla and is then sent back to Rūmān's son.

'Alī follows and pretends to be a saint who has flown to the dome of the church. He denounces Dalīla, and is challenged to fly, something that he then says that he can only do once every forty days. Saisabān comes to the rescue and carries him through the air. She then carries Hārūn, 'Alī and Dalīla back to Baghdad and fetches Rūmān al-Azraq, who is told how he was deceived. Dalīla is now finally executed.

(25)

Dalīla's anklet is given to Zubaida, but as it is only one of a pair, 'Alī sets out to look for the other. In the course of his travels he meets a boy named Muḥammad, who has wanted to be apprenticed to him and whom he now teaches for a year.

Muḥammad sees Nuzhat al-Zamān, daughter of Shāh Muḥammad, in a dream and, accompanied by 'Alī, he reaches her father's city. He arrives in time to save her from a kidnapper who is proposing to have her raped by his slaves, and with 'Alī's help he later marries her.

'Alī is provided with a ship by Shāh Muḥammad and eventually lands on an island where it has been prophesied that he will cure a jinn princess. This he does by removing a snake from her stomach, after which she tells him that the anklet for which he is searching belongs to the jinn queen Danhasha, a fire-worshipper, who was once cured of an illness through a diet of human flesh and blood.

The princess takes him as far as she can, leaving him on an island. Here he acts as umpire in a dispute between two *mārids*, and leaves with the cap of invisibility for which they have been fighting. After entering Danhasha's city he scratches his head; the cap falls off and he is seized, but Saisabān is at hand to rescue him.

Through her help, he is accepted by the jinn and asked to their court. Danhasha is