

# 'THE SPIRIT OF THE FALCON'

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL PERSIAN OF ALI  
MIRZA.

Brown, J P

[Published in the *Knickerbocker*, March 1849 (33:3)]

[Edited and Annotated by Laura Penalver for the University of  
Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project, April 13, 2015.]

ABD EL MALEK relates the following sketch in the history of that celebrated huntsman Ali Mirza:

I was one day sent for in haste, and commanded by the Kibleh<sup>1</sup> Alem (Centre of the Universe) Abbas Shah<sup>2</sup>, to proceed to the mountains of the Sultanick<sup>3</sup>, and bring him one of the young wild goats of which His Majesty was so fond. To hear was to obey; and so pressing my forehead upon the dust of His Majesty's footsteps, I mounted my fleetest steed, and was soon far away on the heights where the report of my rifle had so often resounded and brought down the swiftest of the wild game that roam in their solitudes. The perpendicular rays of the sun reached even the bottom of the deep clefts of the mountain, melting the snows accumulated among the crags, when I reached the spot where I desired to secrete myself and lie in wait for the passing game. I hobbled my tired steed and left him to graze upon the scanty verdure of a spot at some distance beneath that selected for my seat. Concealed behind a projecting rock, with my loaded gun lying across my knees, I waited from noon until the hour of the third prayer<sup>4</sup>, without however hearing or seeing any of the flocks of wild goats which usually abound on the ridges of the Sultanick mountains. Above me arose an elevated crag of dark rock, against which the waning sun shed its beams with unmitigated fervor; to its summit my eyes were often turned with the eager expectation of seeing it surmounted by the nimble-footed wild goat, or its kid, and by one successful shot, to be enabled to return to the presence of my benevolent patron and master, the Centre of the Universe.

Tired with watching, and inconvenienced by the heat of the sun, I quite despaired of meeting with success, and was fearful lest my visit should result in failure. While in this state of mind, suddenly a falcon, of that large, strong and keen kind which only frequents the wildest parts of the mountains,

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Kibleh' might be related to the Arabic word 'Kiblah': the direction towards which Muslims pray, facing Mecca (OED). Mecca is considered the holiest city and the center of the Islamic faith.

<sup>2</sup> A reference to Abbas I of Persia (Shah Abbas the Great), the 5<sup>th</sup> Safavid King of Iran who ruled from 1588 to 1629. For more information on his legacy as king see the Encyclopedia Britannica online.

<sup>3</sup> 'Sultanick' could be synonymous with the more recognizable term 'sultanate', which according to the OED is "a state or country subject to a sultan".

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the five prayers in Islam, Salat al-Asr, or afternoon prayer. Usually performed at the beginning of sunset.

after making a turn round the spot on which I sat, descended and perched upon the extreme point of the crag, whence it looked down at me with its bright piercing eyes, and seemed to reproach me for intruding on its hunting-grounds. It had apparently just dined on some object of prey, for after eyeing me for a moment, it leisurely cleansed its beak with its claws, adjusted its plumage, and then turned its head to gaze, as it were, at the now fast declining luminary of the world.

'I had full leisure to examine its graceful form, its crooked bill, even the keenness of its black and yellow eyes, its varied plumage, and the length of its strong claws. It seemed to look down upon me in perfect consciousness of security, with a proud look of defiance. But the bullet is a swift messenger of fate, and death comes with appalling doom upon the proud heart, upon the being which, forgetful of its borrowed existence, believes itself everlasting. And I, disregarding of that divine decree, which gives to all things an equal right to life<sup>5</sup>, let fly the cruel emissary of destruction; the proud, brave falcon fell before the arrow of destiny, and its bright eye soon closed forever upon the wild scenes where it had so often and so recently gazed with piercing keenness!

'At the sight of the deed of my commission, I felt a pang of remorse: The brave bird that had within the same hour looked up even into the face of the sun; which had soared heavenward through the blue atmosphere of the skies, now lay at my feet in all the cold, motionless, silence of death. I could not divest myself of the conviction that I had acted ruthlessly, and that the deed would not be disregarded by the Lord of all creatures.

'Pained by these reflections, and overcome by the heat, I fell asleep where I sat; and my mind wandered back to the Sultanick, to the palace of Abbas Shah. But in so short a time, what a change had come over the condition of my family! Ayesha<sup>6</sup>, the heart-binding, the world-seducing, the beloved and pure wife of my home, was no more the pure and virtuous woman I had always thought her to be; and the child she had borne, the fair and guileless Lulu, whom I had ever cherished as my own daughter, was not my own; but the fruit of the illicit intercourse of her mother with one whom I had hitherto honored as my friend. Then, with the rapidity of lightning in my mind, passed the sad scene of a divorcement, and the restoring to my wife of her marriage portion, and my bosom now burst with the worst feelings for her whom I had just loved even to madness; and her recently-adored figure now only gave rise to sentiments of the deepest aversion, hatred and revenge. And *my* child, that angel child, which had been dearer to me than the pupil of my eye, my heart, my existence itself, though no longer mine, still was my soul's attraction, the Kibleh of all my longing hopes. I saw her leave me, borne away to her guilty mother; her little arms outheld toward me, her blue eyes filled with tears, clearer than the dew-drops on the white roses of Kashan, and more precious than the fairest pearls of Bahrain. I beheld the hated figure of the man whom I had cherished as a friend, lead away my wife, and, acknowledging my child as his own, force her from the arms of her aged nurse.

---

<sup>5</sup> A Quranic reference to verse 6:38 in the Qur'an, translated by Yusuf Ali from Arabic to English: "There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end."

<sup>6</sup> One of the several ways to transcribe the name of 'A'isha', one of Prophet Muhammad's wives, and his widow after his death.

'This was not all. My home, close by the palace of the Centre of the Universe, had been held in the name of my late wife; and as if her own conduct had not brought sufficient misery upon her unerring though too confiding husband, she reduced him to abject misery, and drove him forever from the scene of past happy hours, by disposing of it to an unforgiving rival, who now succeeded me in the esteem of the Shah<sup>7</sup>, and passed it over legally to his name. I was thus turned out into the public streets to seek another home and happiness wherever I could find it.

'Bending my steps toward the eastern gate of the city, I was hastening to beg a shelter in the cell of the solitary Dervish<sup>8</sup>, who watches at the holy tomb of the martyr<sup>9</sup>, the Said Abd el Ghezi, and spend the remainder of my wretched existence in constant prayer and devotion, when I heard a noise above my head, resembling the swift passage of those departed ones on their way to eternity; and looking up, I distinctly beheld the Falcon I had murdered, and heard a voice saying:

'As a mortal, thy cruelty caused me but the momentary pang of expiring nature, but thou as an immortal being hast just suffered that deeper agony of the mind which knows no dying. Awake from thy slumber, ruthless man; thy wife is still pure and virtuous, and her child is thine own offspring. Return to thy home, and its inmates, for the spirit of the Falcon is revenged!'

Ali Mirza adds: 'All my suffering had indeed been only in a dream; and thus was I taught that the evil deeds which are not punishable after death are nevertheless atoned for in that state of existence, half life, half death, which connects the two together by a mysterious and incomprehensible link.



---

<sup>7</sup> Shah: King (OED).

<sup>8</sup> According to the OED, a Muslim friar, practicing Sufism, known for their whirling, dancing, and chanting as acts of religious devotion.

<sup>9</sup> Sufis were known and criticized by other Muslims for their practice of visiting saints' graves and praying to them. This was seen as against the Qur'an, because a Muslim should only pray to God.

## *EDITOR'S NOTE*

This tale is a cautionary tale warning that even those with religion should worry about committing acts that damage a conscious, despite not being punishable on judgement day. This, and other elements of Islamic history present in the story is not surprising, considering the Persian Empire had been conquered by the Muslims in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Within this tale, there seem to be interestingly progressive ideas that shed some light on the culture of the Persian Empire, perhaps dating back to the time when Shah Abbas the Great was ruler. Unfortunately, I could not recover the date in which the original Persian tale was written by the Author 'Abd El Malek'; nevertheless the environmental theme, as well as slight flickers of gender and religious equality themes, render this tale an interesting study for modern readers of literature.

The environmental aspect of the story being the most obvious, I would like to discuss the other two elements for the readers to appreciate. The Shah who was mentioned in the tale, Abbas I of Persia, is known by today's historians for his extremely generous (comparatively) mentality regarding religious tolerance; despite leading a Muslim state and being from a time when religious tolerance was not a very common sentiment, even in Europe. The element of gender equality ties into Islamic history; it has to do with the wives of Muhammad and of Ali Mizra. There is an interesting parallel between the two, in that the wife of the hunter is said to own their home, resembling the first wife of Muhammad, Khadija, who was not only considerably older and wealthier than the prophet, but was also his supervisor/boss. The seemingly high status of this hunter's wife immediately contradicts what most of society would think of, when discussing women's role in Muslim culture.

Laura Penalver



## WORKS CITED

"Abbas I". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015.

Web. 15 Apr. 2015

Allen, Roger, and Shawkat M. Toorawa. *Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: William

B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011. Print.

"dervish, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 16 April 2015.

"kiblah, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 15 April 2015.

"shah, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 16 April 2015.

"sultanate, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 15 April 2015.

Yusuf, Ali. "Chapter 6: Surat I-an'am (The Cattle)." *The Qur'an*. N.p.: Brentwood, MD, 1989. N. pag.

Print.

