

C. 1339

He found a mighty city of brave men  
 With ruddy faces and with flaxen hair,  
 All fit for battle and the day of fight.  
 They came before Sikandar at his bidding  
 With bodies bent and hands upon their heads.  
 He asked their chiefs: "What wonders have ye here?"

An elder thus replied: "Star-favoured Sháh,  
 And lion-capturer! there is a Deep  
 Beyond the city. Brighter than that water  
 Naught have we seen, for when the radiant sun  
 Arriveth there it setteth in those depths.  
 Beyond it all is dark and lost to sight,  
 While of that place of darkness I have heard  
 So many tales that they are numberless.

A man of lore, a worshipper of God,  
 Declareth that there is a fountain there,  
 And mine informant, who is wise and great,  
 Referreth to it as the Fount of Life.

That wise, discerning man said: 'How shall one  
 Who drinketh of the Fount of Life e'er die?  
 From Paradise it runneth; wash therein  
 The body, and thy sins will pass away.'

Then Cæsar said: "As to this place of gloom,  
 How can beasts fare therein?"

The devotee

Made answer: "Ye must ride upon young horses."

The Sháh bade herdsmen gather to the camp  
 The herds at large and chose ten thousand steeds,  
 All four-year-olds and fit for battle-needs.

## § 29

*How Sikandar went into the Gloom to seek the Water of Life  
and spake with Birds and Isráfil*

Sikandar, summoning his prudent chiefs,  
 Marched cheerly thence his host and reached a city  
 Whereto he saw no middle and no end,  
 And having all things needful in abundance.  
 'Twas full of garths, parks, halls, and palaces.  
 There he dismounted and at dawn next day  
 Went forward unattended toward the Source  
 Which in his story of the hero's fortunes  
 The rustic minstrel calleth that of Life.  
 He tarried there until the sun, grown pale,  
 Sank in that fount of lapis-lazuli.  
 He saw the wonder wrought by holy God—  
 The Bright One's disappearance from the world—  
 Returned to camp, and pondered much. That night  
 He prayed to God, mused on the Fount of Life,  
 First chose the most enduring of his troops,  
 Took with him food for forty days and more,  
 And went forth eagerly to look on wonders.  
 He camped his other troops within the city,  
 And sought and found a guide. Khizr, who was chief  
 Among the nobles of that folk, advised him.  
 Sikandar did as Khizr enjoined, surrendered  
 Both heart and soul to his allegiance,  
 And said: "Shrewd-hearted man! be diligent  
 Herein, and if we shall obtain the Water  
 Of Life then we will pass much time in prayer.  
 He will not die who nutureth thus his soul,  
 And in his wisdom refugeeth with God.  
 I have two signets that in sight of water  
 Shine out at night like suns. Take one, lead on,  
 And tender well thy person and thy life;

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The other one shall light me on my way.  
 I go amid the Darkness with mine escort,  
 And we will see what God omnipotent  
 Preserveth hidden where so much is seen.  
 Thou art my leader, and He is my refuge,  
 And showeth me the Water and the Way."

Now when the troops marched toward the Fount of  
 Life

A shout rose from the desert: "God is great!"<sup>1</sup>

Khizr left that station and all food behind him,  
 And fared thus for two days and nights while none  
 Bestirred his lips to eat. Upon the third  
 Two ways showed mid the Darkness, and the Sháh  
 Lost trace of Khizr. What while the prophet went  
 Toward the Fount of Life, exalting thus  
 His living head to Saturn, bathed his body  
 And head in that bright Water, sought no guard  
 Save God, drank, rested, and returned apace,  
 More instant ever both in prayer and praise,  
 Sikandar reached the light and saw a mountain  
 Both high and bright, and on its top four columns  
 Of aloe-wood uplifted to the clouds.

On every column was a mighty nest,  
 And in each nest there sat a huge, green bird,  
 Which, speaking loudly in the Rúman tongue,  
 Hailed the victorious master of the world,  
 Who hurried to them when he heard. One said:—

"O votary of toil! what seekest thou  
 Within this Wayside Inn, for though thou raisest  
 Thy head to heaven above it will dismiss thee  
 In grief at last? But now that thou hast come,  
 Hast seen aught built of reeds or reed-baked bricks?"

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He answered: "Both: our dwellings are directly  
 Or indirectly made with reeds."

The bird,

<sup>1</sup> Alláh akbar. Properly "God is greatest." This part is very Arabic.

On hearing this reply, perched lower down,  
 Astonying that worshipper of God,  
 And asked him: "Hast thou heard within the world  
 The sounds of harp, of reveller, and song?"

He made this answer: "One, whose lot it is  
 To have no share in joy, the glad account not  
 Although for them he pour out heart and soul."

From that tall column of lign-aloe-wood  
 The bird flew to the ground; its musky perch  
 Was void. The bird inquired: "Do understanding  
 And right prevail or do defect and guile?"

The Sháh made answer: "He that seeketh know-  
 ledge  
 Is eminent in every company."

Back from dark ground to column went the bird  
 And, having cleaned its talons with its beak,  
 Inquired of Cæsar: "Why do devotees  
 Dwell on the mountains?"

"The devout," he said,  
 "Find not another place so good for worship."

The bird ran up the column to its nest.  
 The monarch was delighted with that fowl,  
 Which with its talons sharpened up its bill  
 In full security. Then it instructed  
 Sikandar to ascend the topmost peak,  
 Afoot and unescorted, there to see  
 That which would cause the merriest to weep.  
 On hearing this he went toward the mountain  
 Alone to view the sight upon its summit,  
 And there saw Isráfil, with trump in hand  
 And head uplifted, standing at his post,  
 Wind on his lips and moisture in his eye,  
 Till God shall bid him blow. On seeing Sikandar  
 He roared like thunder: "O thou slave of greed!  
 Toil not so much, because some day a Call  
 Will reach thine ears. Be less concerned for crown

And throne. Make ready to depart and bind  
The baggage on."

"It is my lot from fortune,"  
The Sháh replied, "for save by stir and roaming  
I may not look on sight and mystery."

He then descended, wailing and imploring  
The Giver of all good, and, with a guide  
Preceding him, advanced along that route,  
Involved in gloom, which when the army entered  
A cry ascended from the darksome heights:—  
"He that shall take a stone up from the road  
Will grieve for what he beareth in his hand,  
And if he taketh none he will repent,  
And heartily in each case seek a cure."

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The soldiers all gave ear, and every one  
Grew thoughtful at that cry since, whether they  
Took stones or no, must they not count on ills?  
One said: "It is the punishment of guilt  
To bear repentance and the stones as well."

Another said: "We should take some; perchance  
We may not have to savour pain and toil."

One man took of the stones; another left them;  
A third through indolence took little ones.  
When from the region of the Fount of Life  
They reached the plain, emerging from the Gloom,  
Each sought the truth and then perceived the trick.  
One had his bosom full of jewels cut,  
Another his with jewels in the rough,  
And both regretted that they had so few;  
Why had they passed by emeralds as vile?  
But sorrier still was he that picked up none  
At leaving precious gems as he had done.