GHAZZALI'S EPISODE OF THE BIRDS

THE EPISODE OF THE BIRDS

Once upon a time the different species of birds gathered together in order to select a king to rule over them. They agreed that the phoenix was the bird best fitted for that purpose. They had heard that the phoenix lived in the west on a certain island. They, therefore, decided to proceed hence, to stand in its court and have the pleasure of placing themselves at its service.
Come let us go to Layla’s house,
And gain admission and announce:
Our purpose is to see her there,
And our homage and love declare.

Thereupon their latent yearnings surged in their hearts,
and inspired them to wax poetic and say:

In what part of the world can we ever meet,
If, like a king, access to thee is barred?

As they were about to start, they heard a voice from beyond the clouds say, “Throw not yourself with your own hands into ruin!” rather, stay where you are and leave not your place: for if you depart from your native land you will double your anxiety and add to your sorrows. Beware, therefore, of exposing yourselves to danger and of playing with fire.”

Safety from Sut’ida’s choking clutches,
And freedom from her neighbour’s grip,
Depend on shunning their lure and bait,
And keeping far from their hearth and home.

But when they heard this warning from the unseen world of might, their longing increased, and they became restless, perplexed, and sleepless.

If all the doctors should prescribe,
For your love-lorn and aching heart,
Anything but Layla’s soothing words,
Their effort is worthless from the start.

For it is a fact that:

Nought shall satisfy his loving heart,
Or soothe its aches and flaming anguish,
Except that he and his only love
Shall live and love ‘neath one single roof.

Their hearts swelled with grief and anguish, and their heads were filled with folly and madness. The joys and ecstasies of expectation drowned all thoughts of hesitation and doubt, and they embarked upon their hazardous journey, without counting the cost. Indeed they were warned

That before them lay extensive wastes, high mountains, and deep treacherous seas, frigid regions and torrid zones—in-surmountable obstacles which lead to destruction and death. They were urged to be content with what they had, lest they be driven to ruin by greed. But all was in vain: they would not listen or heed the warning. Instead they set out on their journey saying:

Whenever a person is lorn and lonesome,
And his need is great, the help is scant.

Then each and every one of them mounted ambition, bridled with longing and saddled with love, and pushed on saying:

O’er creg and vale, by day and night,
My mount and I press on and on;
The thought of union with my love,
Sustains my will to fight and win;
To stand before her radiant face,
And with my arms her neck embrace.

They deviated from the paths of freedom, and were drawn into the lanes of necessity and compulsion. Those who hailed from the torrid zone died of cold in the frigid region, and those who came from the frigid region perished of heat in the torrid zone. They were struck by thunderbolts and lashed by storms. Only a few escaped and reached the island of the king safely.

They then sought audience with the king; but when audience was denied them, they begged that someone tell the king of their presence on the island. Upon hearing of their presence the king ordered one of the royal attendants to inquire of them concerning the nature of their mission. When they informed him that they came in order to invite the king to rule over them and be their sovereign lord, they were told, “In vain have you troubled yourselves, for whether you like it or not, whether you come or go, we are your king and sovereign lord, and we have no need for you.” When they saw that they were not wanted, they felt embarrassed and ashamed, and became discouraged and downcast. A feeling of bewilderment encompassed them,
and a sense of awe terrified them. They then realized that it was impossible for them to return to their native land. They had no strength left in them. In despair they wished to be left alone to die on the island.

Would the desert folk take in this humble guest
Whom might has overtaken by their camp?
He would be content if they would extend
To him a gracious look and kindly word.

But plague spread among them, and they were on the verge of complete annihilation. They, therefore, resorted to prayer, their only hope.

Drunken and dizzled of love's bitter cup,
Each to his neighbour was a nurse.

Then just as they sank into the depths of despair, and became sick of life itself, a ray of hope suddenly broke upon them, and they heard a voice say: You need not lose hope, for no one “despairs of the mercy of God except those who are doomed to perdition.” 111 For while the limit in wealth results in pride, and turns down all requests, the beautiful quality of generosity demands benevolence, and heedst all petitions. And now that you have known the extent of your ignorance regarding our rank and position, it behooves us to give you shelter. For this our house is the abode of generosity and the dwelling place of munificence. It seeks out the poor who have shunned security and ease. But for this dwelling place, the lord of all creatures and the foremost among them would not have said, “Grant me a life of poverty, O Lord.”112 Furthermore he who becomes aware of his lack of merit is worthy to be accepted by the king, the phoenix, as his peer and companion.

When at long last hope displaced despair in their hearts, and cheer replaced dejection therein, they felt sure of the outpouring of generosity, and certain of the downpouring of grace. Thereupon they inquired about their companions saying: What has become of those who have

traversed extensive wastes, and in whose company we crossed valleys deep and wide? Has their blood been shed in vain, or would it be compensated by mulct or bloodwit? “Not in the least”, was the reply, since “if any shall leave his home and fly to God and His Apostle, and death overtakes him—his reward from God is sure.” 113 They were chosen by the hand of fate after they have been proved and tried. “And say not of those who were slain on the path of God that they are dead; nay, they are living!” 114 Again they asked: What has become of those who were drowned in the deep, and failed to reach their destination? And again the reply came, “And repute not those slain on the path of God to be dead; nay, they are living!” 115 For he who has brought you here and caused them to die, has also brought them back to life; and he who has stirred in you the feeling of longing, so that you embarked upon this tiresome and hazardous journey in search of your goal, has called them unto himself, and carried them away, and brought them nigh unto him, and favoured them with proximity to him. They are the veils of majesty and the curtains of power. (They recline) “on the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent king.” 116 Thereupon they said: Is it at all possible for us to see them? In reply to this request they were told, “No. For you are (separated from them) by the veils of majesty and the curtains of humanity; you are the chained prisoners of time. But if you fulfil your purpose and depart from your homes, you will then exchange visitations and meet.” They then asked: And what has become of those who were detained by greed and negligence, and, therefore, did not embark upon this journey? In answer to their question, they were told, “Had they been desirous to take the field, they would have got ready for that purpose the munitions of war. But God was averse to their marching forth, and made them laggards.” 117 If we wanted them we would have called them; but we were averse to them, and consequently, we

112 Al Tirmidhi, Sahā, Zabī: 37.
113 Sūrah 2: 149.
114 Sūrah 3: 163.
115 Sūrah 1: 65.
116 Sūrah 1: 66.
drove them away. Did you yourselves come by yourselves, or did we ourselves call you? Did you yourselves long to come, or did we stir the feeling of longing in you? We ourselves have moved you, and carried you and them over land and sea." When they heard that, they rejoiced at the fulfilment of providence and the pledge of care. Thereupon their joy became perfect and their trust complete. They felt secure therein and tranquil, and faced the substance of faith with steadfastness, and were freed by continual calm from vacillation and change.

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I wonder, is there any difference between the person repairing to the island and the postulant (munbtadi)
 who has resolved in his heart to do so. For the postulant says, "We have come to our king." But he who returns to his original life ("O thou soul which art at rest, return to thy Lord") returns to hear the call. When he is told, "Why have you come?", he replies, "Why have I been called?", nay, "Why have I been carried to that land which is the land of favoured proximity?". At any rate, the reply depends upon the question, and the question upon the amount of insight, and accomplishment upon aspiration.

He who is disposed to relish such witticisms had better renew his acquaintance with the language of the birds and the realms of the spirit. For the language of the birds is not understood except by him who belongs to the kingdom of the birds. To renew the acquaintance therewith entails the constant use of ablutions, faithful observation of the appointed hours of prayer, and the spending of at least an hour of solitude in remembrance. This is the sweet renewal of acquaintance. In fact there are only two ways. "Therefore, remember me: I will remember you", or, "They have forgotten God, and He hath forgotten them." Therefore, to him who persists in the path of remembrance shall be said, "I am the friend of him who remembers me"; and
to him who follows the road of neglect and forgetfulness shall be declared, "And whoso shall turn away from the remembrance of God, we shall appoint a devil for him, and he shall be his companion." Every single person is a follower of one or the other of these two categories. On the day of resurrection each will have one or the other of the two marks: the criminals will be known by their mark, and the righteous by theirs. "Their marks are on their faces, because of the effect of prostration." 23

May God, by His good favour, save you, and guide your footsteps into the way of truth.

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**The Westernization of Arabia**

In a paper on the possibility of union among the Arab States (American Historical Review, July, 1943) Professor Philip Hitti points to the contrast between the Arabs of the Fertile Crescent and those in Arabia proper. From Syria to Iraq there is a strong westernization movement. But he goes on to say:

In this respect the Arabian quadrilateral stands in marked contrast to the Arab crescent, especially to its western horn Syria-Palestine and Lebanon. The emergence of the ultraconservative, puritanical Wahhabis under ibn-al-Sa'ud as the leading community in the peninsula after the First World War represents the extremity of the pendulum swing in that direction in Islam. The swing toward the other extreme of Westernization and secularization is represented by the Kemalist Turks. The Turks and the Wahhabis represent opposite extremes in modern Islamic movements. If the postwar Turks proved to be the "protestants of Islam," the Wahhabis proved to be the greatest conformists—the sporadic and superficial attempt at modernization by ibn-al-Sa'ud notwithstanding.

Equally immune to European secular ideas are the Zaydis of al-Yaman, whose Imam, Yahya, is even more provincial than his rival to the north. Rivalry between these two, the strongest potentates of Arabia proper, deep-seated hostility between the Ikhwan followers of the one and the Zaydis of the other, together with the low level of culture throughout and the narrow horizon and particularism of political life, preclude the possibility of any immediate approach and a gravitation toward a common center of Pan-Arabism. The rest of Arabia, including the Trucial Coast on the Persian Gulf, has been for decades weaned from the motherland and, under British influence, oriented India-ward.