



"Through the silk, Talfa sensed the Black Adder's eyes upon her."

The Black Adder

By DOROTHY QUICK

A tale of India--Talfa, the dancing girl, tries to thwart the burning passion of the Rajah

TALFA opened the casement window, and leaning out into the night, tried to see the garden below. It was a quiet, moonless night and she could distinguish nothing. Even the stars were veiled and a heavy impenetrable blue-

blackness covered everything. But a soft wind carried the scent of the jasmines to her nostrils.

She knew the garden so well that she could visualize it mentally, although its beauties were hidden from her eyes. There was the crystal pool

and beyond it the marble summer house, always cool and inviting. Inside, on the couch of crimson silk, Boud Ali waited. At the thought of him lying there, his slim, muscular body relaxed on the cushions while the black curls of his hair lay loose about his handsome face, Talfa's heart beat faster and her breasts throbbed against the casement sill.

Boud Ali waited for her and her every nerve cried out for him, longed for the relief that only resting in his arms could give. So near he was, such a few short steps and she could feel his lips on hers. Heaven! And yet tonight it could not be!

Talfa shook her head and the two long braids of blue-black hair slipped over the window-ledge, stretching downward into the night. Talfa, like the Fairy Princess of old, had hair that waved softly about her piquant face and then fell rippling downward until it reached her knees. It was very thick and soft and she wore it in braids to keep it out of her way. Her deep brown eyes peered out into the night as though they were striving to see the lover who waited for her, and her red lips trembled a little with the sorrow that enveloped her because she could not go to him.

JUST two short weeks they had known each other. Only fourteen days ago she had danced before the Rajah and his guests. Among them had been Boud Ali. As she made the obscene movements that were meant to drive men mad, she had seen him and read desire in his black eyes—desire which had lit a flame in her own heart.

When the dance was over and she and the other dancing-girls lay exhausted on the mosaics of the floor, she had heard the Rajah's voice.

"Choose whom you will among the dancing-girls to be your companion for the night—save those who are virgin: they are for me alone."

Talfa had raised her head and through the clouds of smoke and incense she had seen Boud Ali start toward her. Willingly would she have stayed and given to him all he asked, she who had never known the touch of man. But it was not to be so; for before he ever reached her side, the chief eunuch had caught her by the wrist and led her and two other girls back to the harem.

There slaves had bathed them with scented waters, dried their hair, and they had sought their couches. Only Talfa could not sleep. The black eyes of Boud Ali had haunted her and the heat of the night had been oppressive.

She remembered so well that she had drawn a soft silk mantle over her and stolen silently down

to the garden. No guards were about. The garden walls were high and the Rajah unafraid of his women betraying him. They knew too well the penalty that would be theirs if they were caught. For his wives perhaps he kept a stricter watch; but of these Talfa knew nothing, she who had been bought for a concubine because of her beauty and her ability to dance.

For a year she had been in the palace and had never seen the Rajah except on the rare occasions when she was called upon to dance, as she had been tonight. But because she was a virgin, she never was allowed to stay for the aftermath of the feast. The Rajah was generous only with those who no longer tempted him. Talfa knew that some time he would send for her, and then——. But that night she had had no room in her thoughts for any one beyond Boud Ali.

She had gone down the tiny stairway like a ghost, past the sleeping eunuch, out into the cooling night; beyond the crystal pool she had sought the marble summer house. Here some day she would know the embraces of the Rajah when his eyes would rest upon her with desire. But for tonight she would dream of the young stranger.

As she entered the pavilion some one rose from the crimson couch and came toward her with outstretched hands. In the glow of the moonlight she saw Boud Ali, and a crimson flush stained her slender young body under the silken robe.

Boud Ali spoke, and his voice was low and musical. "Truly the priest spoke well who said we know not the power of our own thoughts. Here have I lain for hours, willing that you should come to me, and so the desire of my life has been granted. You are here!"

Talfa took a step nearer to him. "But how did you come? The walls are far too high to climb."

His clear laugh rang through the scented night. "Nor did I climb! Gold brought me here—gold and a greedy slave, who opened a little-known door in that high wall, and has promised to do so yet again—and will, if you are kind."

The girl moved forward. "I saw you in the banquet hall," she began.

He moved toward her until they stood face to face. "Beloved," he said softly, "I, too, saw such beauty as I had never dreamed, and love was born in my heart. Smile at me, sweet one. Smile, and tell me that I ask not in vain."

Talfa looked deep into his eyes, and the corners of her mouth curved deliciously. With a sudden gesture of surrender, she stretched forth her

hands.

The next second she was in his arms and her silken mantle lay unheeded on the floor.

Twice since then the marble summer house had sheltered their love. Gold had truly opened the way for Boud Ali, and Talfa thought little of the risk she ran. She merely waited until the women's house was wrapped in slumber before she stole down the tiny stairway. That death would be her portion if she were discovered, faded away before the magic of her lover's kiss. The fact that the death would be a slow, torturous one, not swift and merciful, she never let come into her thoughts. The moment and Boud Ali were sufficient, and she felt that she would gladly pay any price for the joy, of resting in his arms.

But tonight? Tonight her soul was full of terror, not for herself but for him! They had planned to meet, and her heart had been full of eager anticipation. Then only a few short moments ago word had been brought that the Rajah would visit the women's quarters and that the dancing-girls should be ready to amuse him.

TALFA on hearing the news, had prayed silently that his choice fall not on her when the dance was done. Then like a swift stab of horror had come the thought the Rajah would retire to the summer house with whomever he chose. That was the reason she had seen slaves working there today. They were cleaning and perfuming the pavilion for his use. And just at that time Boud Ali would be there waiting. Death would be his portion, and she could not save him. There was no way. The slave who let him into the garden was in the men's part of the palace; so even if she knew which slave it was, she had no way of reaching him. And she would not dare disclose her secret to any one who could send a message. Talfa, herself, could neither read nor write. Only fifteen years old, she had been educated solely to attract and interest the senses.

In sheer panic, she had left the other girls, who were chattering like a group of excited monkeys, and had sought this window overlooking the garden. Out there, not very far away, her lover was waiting. What was it he had said of the power of thought? Gods! If only her thoughts could warn him! But she had no faith in her powers of concentration. By all the Gods, there must be a way! Then out of the night and her own despair, an idea was born.

At their last meeting they had laughingly,

joked of "The Black Adder," a bandit who had been terrorizing the whole province of Tawnpore, so called because he struck quickly like the reptile, and his touch meant death; also because he was always robed in black with a silk hood over his face. No one had the slightest idea of his identity.

When Talfa had playfully refused one of his caresses, Boud Ali had cried, "Submit, or I will call on the Black Adder to make you. See reason, oh, light of my life!"

And then much later, after she had explained that she had refused only for the joy of giving in, they had spoken of the Black Adder again, and Boud Ali had told her some of the bandit's less gory exploits. Perhaps he would remember their conversation and under cover of a song about the Black Adder she could warn the man she loved. No one hearing would think aught, for the Black Adder's name was on every one's lips.

Of her own fate, should she be the chosen one, she had no time to think. Breathlessly she ran to fetch her lute, and quickly returned to her place by the window. She had little time. Soon she would be called for the ritual of bathing, perfuming and robing that always took place before the arrival of the Rajah.

SHE struck the first notes softly. Then the music grew louder, the strain that had been played the night she first saw Boud Ali. She leaned far out the window and threw her clear sweet voice out into the night.

"I, Talfa, sing a song of the Black Adder," she repeated over and over, then swung into her song:

"The Black Adder came to the palace of the King.

Within were jewels for his welcoming.

Only the dancing-girl knew waiting was death's sting;

The dancing-girl sang, go away, go away—

The King comes merrily to me this day.

Black Adder, Black Adder, do not dare to stay!

Black Adder, Black Adder, creep into your hole,

Another night brings another goal—

Only tonight would you pay the toll!

Black Adder——"

Her voice died away as she saw the chief eunuch standing beside her. He laughed a shrill, thin laugh that frayed the edge of her nerve.

"Little fool, to sit in the window and sing of the Black Adder when you should be staining your eyes with kohl to snare your lord with their

beauty!"

Her lute fell forgotten on the floor as one tiny hand pressed against her heart as though to still its wild beating.

"Come, my pretty one," continued the chief eunuch, as he pulled one of her long braids. "By all the Gods, were I a man, you could make me captive by your hair alone!"

Unresisting, she followed him and passively gave herself into the hands of the women. The fatalism of her race had come to her aid. She had done her best. Now all rested upon the knees of the Gods.

LATER that evening, robed in blue gauze that revealed more than it concealed, with her long hair flowing about her shoulders, she danced with the other girls before the Rajah. Automatically her body moved to the music. Her thoughts were far away, with Boud Ali—hoping.

Suddenly, as the dance brought her near to the couch where the Rajah was lying, she felt the long ends of her hair seized firmly. She stopped writhing and felt herself gently drawn toward the Rajah.

Presently she stood facing him. He held her hair in his firm hands, having pulled it over her shoulder. She felt his eyes pass over her. Somehow she knew fate was upon her and that she would be the chosen one. Trembling, she heard his voice, "Bid the music stop, and send those other girls away." Then she felt his hands upon her, tearing away her robes.

"With hair like that you need no further covering. Come, dance for me, so; and when the dance is over, if you still please me—and fear not but that you will—you shall be honored with my love."

With a slight shudder she shook her hair over her, and of a truth it was more concealing than the blue gauze had been. "A Rajah has no love to give a dancing-girl," she cried, remembering she had only one life to lose.

The Rajah laughed, then his eyes looked into hers. "Perhaps—who knows?—even love! At any rate, tonight you shall be mine. I swear it! Now—dance."

The music started. Automatically Talfa began to move to its rhythm, and then she started to turn and twist in a series of wild convulsions. Another thought had come to her. Perhaps she could so madden and inflame his senses that he would take her here in this room where they were, and Boud

Ali would not be discovered in the summer house, if her song had not been heard.

She danced with a furious abandon such as she had never believed herself capable of. If she had drunk of the most potent of aphrodisiacs she could have put no more into her dance.

At last the music came to an end with a loud crash of cymbals, and she fell exhausted at the Rajah's feet.

The Rajah detached the golden robe from his shoulders and threw it over her. Then he came and lifted her into his arms.

"I, myself, will carry you to the pavilion," he cried, his breath coming quickly, his eyes mad with lust.

Two slaves ran before with lighted torches, and the chief eunuch followed behind.

In his arms Talfa lay limply. Soon she would know, and she could hardly bear the suspense. One last effort she would make, for her love's sake. "My lord, why do we not stay here?"

The Rajah made no answer, only strode rapidly on.

Yet another effort she put forth. "Will you not send the men away?"

This time she met with success. "Have no fear. Tonight is yours alone, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, oh lovely one!"

Talfa almost laughed aloud. For her there would be no more tomorrows. When he discovered that another man had spoiled the fruit for him, she had no doubt what her fate would be, unless she could so madden him—

THEY had reached the pavilion door. The Rajah turned to the slaves. "Put the torches in place and then go—all of you—and come not near until the sun shines brightly from the heavens."

When he had been obeyed, he carried her over the threshold. No one was in the marble summer house!

"Praise to the Gods!" whispered Talfa, and the Rajah hearing, misunderstood, and crushed his lips on hers.

Finally he laid her on the crimson couch and drew away the golden robe. The crimson silk brought out the whiteness of her body. She looked like a living statue as she lay before him.

"Gods!" he cried, "but you are beautiful!" and he moved closer toward her.

All thoughts of submission fled from Talfa. Better death than the embraces of this man. Now that Boud Ali was safe, she was no longer afraid.

She struggled frantically. A cruel gleam came into the Rajah's face, as he pressed her close and sought to force her to comply with his desires.

Just when from sheer exhaustion she could fight no more, she felt the Rajah's arms loosen their hold, and wide-eyed beheld two hands dragging him to his feet.

Forgetful of herself, she looked up. "Gods!" she exclaimed. "The Black Adder!" For holding the Rajah's arms tightly behind his back was a man clothed in black from head to toe with a hood over his face that had slits for eyes and mouth.

The Rajah made a desperate struggle to free himself, but he had been caught off guard and was held by hands of iron.

"What do you want?" he cried finally.

Talfa covered herself with the golden robe before the Black Adder spoke. His voice was muffled by the silken hood, but there was strength in it.

"I had sought your life, oh, Rajah of Tawnpore—your life and your jewels. But even an 'Adder' can be merciful!"

"My guards will give you no mercy," threatened the Rajah in a voice from which he tried vainly to hide his fear.

The Black Adder laughed long and hard. "Think you I am named for nothing? Hidden in the bushes, I heard your order and I waited until the guards had surely gone. Not until the sun is high in the heavens will they come. The Rajah has spoken!"

The ruler of Tawnpore bowed his head. When he finally raised it, he spoke shakily, "Your price?"

The black head leaned over close to the Rajah's. Through the silk, Talfa sensed his eyes upon her and drew her robe closer together over her heaving bosoms.

"I have no price," said the Black Adder. "Yet once I will be merciful. Here, you!" he called to the girl, "tear silken strands from those curtains so that I can bind this man!"

Talfa obeyed silently.

"How dare you?" cried the Rajah.

"Better being bound than dead. I will leave you here on yonder couch and your slaves will release you in the morning. Then you can tell them the Black Adder knows how to be kind."

The Rajah said nothing. Talfa brought the strip of silk to the bandit and under his direction helped to tie the Rajah's hands behind his back.

THE Black Adder stretched his arms. "I am afraid," he said softly, "I must rob you of your pearls; and the Ruby of Tawnpore, which I have long envied, will now be mine."

Swiftly he stripped the Rajah of his jewels, which in truth were worth a king's ransom. Working fast, he tied the ruler of Tawnpore securely and laid him on the couch. He bound his body fast about with the crimson silk; then he stuffed a gag into the ruler's mouth and made it fast.

As he finished, Talfa tried to steal toward the doorway and freedom, but swifter than the snake for whom he was named, the man caught her wrist. "Not so—you who are the brightest jewel of all, come with me!"

"No, no!" shrieked Talfa, as he lifted her in his arms. "Will you come quietly?" he snarled. "Or must I silence you, too?"

Talfa made a gesture of assent. "I have no choice," she whispered.

As he carried her out of the marble summer house that had given her such joy and such misery, Talfa reflected that perhaps it was better this way. At least she was free from the Rajah, and Boud Ali was safe. Perhaps when the Black Adder tired of her, he would set her free; or failing that, if she could find a knife—a strange sense of helplessness descended upon her.

She was conscious that the Black Adder carried her through a low doorway, for he stooped slightly. On the other side were men and horses. A man held her while the bandit mounted an animal as black as himself. Then he leaned over and threw a dark cloak over the Rajah's golden one. She was then lifted up into his arms, and she heard him give the order to ride—and the company moved forth into the night.

They stopped only once, at the outer gates of the palace. Here a paper was given the guards, who let them pass at once. Talfa could see nothing, as the Black Adder had thrown part of the cloak over her head, but she could hear the rustle of the paper.

For a long time they rode furiously. Talfa lost track of time. The swift motion of the horse and the strength of the arms that held her were her last conscious recollections, as she sank into the deep sleep that only comes with exhaustion.

IT WAS light when she opened her eyes. Through the folds of the cloak she could see the sun's rays. She stirred a little.

"Beloved, I thought you would never open

your eyes," a well-known voice vibrated in her ears.

Talfa sank back, thinking she dreamed. The cloak was pulled off. The sudden light after the darkness made her blink.

Presently her eyes became accustomed to the light, and she looked up at her captor.

"Boud Ali!" she cried, and touched his smooth face with her hand to see if he were real.

"My little love," he murmured. Then, bending over without slackening his horse's gait, he kissed her fiercely.

Presently they came back to earth. "But how?" asked Talfa. "Where is the Black Adder?"

Boud Ali's free hand dangled a bit of black silk before her eyes. "Here," he cried gayly. "I heard your song and knew the message you meant to convey. So I sought out the Rajah and bade him farewell. He gave me a pass for myself and men. Then I gave a purse of gold to the slave for a key to the garden gate, ostensibly to bid a last farewell to you. After that I waited for the Rajah to bring you to me."

"Suppose he had chosen another?" breathed Talfa.

Her lover laughed. "He could not have, my beautiful! I had my men ready to overpower the guards, but when I heard them dismissed, I sent my

men back to the horses, and waited. The rest you know."

"Where are we going?" Talfa asked; not that it mattered, now that she was in her lover's arms. Not even the fact that he was the Black Adder made any difference to her.

"To my home in the Hills. We are quite safe. The Rajah will never know you are Boud Ali's, and together we will find happiness."

"And wealth," added Talfa, remembering the Rajah's jewels. "Only, I shall be afraid when you are off on your expeditions."

"I shall never leave you, now that you are really mine," he promised.

Her laughter rang out like tinkling silver bells, "Then there is the end of the Black Adder!"

Boud Ali shrugged, "Why?"

"If you go forth no more——"

His own mirth drowned hers, "Oh foolish, one, I but played a part for one night, and borrowed a name to gain my love. If I had taken you, the Rajah would have found us out and death would have been our lot. But for the Black Adder he will not look. For my part, I shall think kindly of the bandit that all so abuse."

"And I shall ever bless his name!" cried Talfa as she raised her lips for her lover's kiss.