

THE TWO MINARETS

THE STORY OF A SYRIAN MASTER BUILDER

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BY HERMAN BERNSTEIN

I. Ahmed Karn was considered the best builder in Damascus. If any one who was not stung by the desire to build for himself a comfortable and pretty house had to invite Ahmed Karn as the builder, he built houses as though cast of iron. He arranged the rooms so skilfully that you could not arrange them more conveniently even if you thought about it throughout the fast of Ramazan. The windows in his structures were always in the right place, the trees and flowers around the houses were always beautifully arranged, and the harem was so conveniently separated from the other part of the house that all were pleased, the men as well as the women, the hosts as well as the guests.

It was believed that the people who lived in the houses built by Ahmed Karn were happier than others and grew rich more rapidly than others.

There is no doubt that Ahmed Karn had deserved his great reputation as a master builder.

But he was particularly skilful in building minarets. In this domain no one even dared compete with him. It was known throughout Damascus, even among the small children, that no one in Syria and perhaps even anywhere else in the Mohammedan world could build better minarets than Ahmed Karn. His minarets were as straight as poplars and as stately as hours, nymphs of paradise. No one knew why the minarets came out of his hands so beautiful and strong. Perhaps Ahmed Karn had some special secret? No one knew.

The minarets constructed by other builders seemed to look like his. But upon closer examination one found that they were different. Something was lacking in them—the balustrades were not exactly in their proper place and the roofs were not so gracefully bent and the crescent seemed to have inclined to the wrong side.

Ahmed Karn's minaret stood before the people who watched it as though it were made of one rock and everything was beautiful about it. And the more people looked at the minarets made by other builders the more convinced they became that Ahmed Karn was a genius as a builder of minarets.

He worked like all other builders; he would take his ruler, his lead wire, his lime scraper and he would place one stone upon another. He would thus place several rows of stones, then read a chapter of the Koran, come down, look at his work and then get up again. And thus he worked until the minaret was finished.

He examined every stone carefully and if he was not pleased with it he gave it back to his workmen to hew it once more. But no one interfered with the other builders; they could also examine the stones and come down and read the Koran.

Evidently it was not this that made his minarets so extraordinary.

Ahmed Karn was proud of his fame and he accepted all honors as his due. But there was one thing that made him feel depressed—he had no son to whom he could bequeath his wonderful art. Therefore when his relatives and acquaintances asked him about his heir and successor Ahmed answered sadly:

"The glorious and great God knows what He is doing. There were master builders before me, and there will be master builders after me. God is omnipotent!"

Of course Ahmed always employed several workmen. He paid them well, and he would not teach any one of them the art of building to perfection. He did not want anything to be able to say: "Here, I am doing as good work as Ahmed Karn!" This thought tormented him. If he had a son it would be another matter. Oh, he would have transmitted to him all his art, all his love for the greatest art in life, the art of construction.

Ahmed Karn used to say that a man needs three things in order to be perfectly at ease and happy on earth; he must be conscious of God, he must have a sound body and a comfortable dwelling. The sheikhs-ul-Islam should develop in human beings this consciousness of God; God would then give sound bodies to the righteous and as for comfortable dwellings, Allah had taught Ahmed Karn to build such homes.

Thus he would have taught his art to his son, but he was determined that his art should rather die together with him than to transmit it to a stranger.

There was a workman employed by Ahmed Karn, an orphan named Rashid. He had commenced to work for him at the age of 15, and now he was 30 years old. He was a good worker, clever, always punctual. He was tall, broad shouldered, muscular and stately, only his head was somewhat bent, like that of Ahmed Karn. He looked from under his lowered eyebrows, his dark eyes flashed and he saw everything. Ahmed Karn respected and valued him for his ability and alertness, but did not like him. Why he did not like him Ahmed Karn could not explain even to himself. Rashid was an honest and obedient workman, but there was something in his soul that seemed to hide from everybody, even from those nearest to him.

This "something" always appeared to Ahmed Karn to be charged with enmity. Why should not Rashid look at Ahmed openly and trustingly? He had worked for him for fifteen years and lived in his home. Another in his place would have become like a son to Ahmed Karn, would have won his love. But he did

not. He seemed attached to him and yet he was strange to him.

Why did not Ahmed discharge him, why did he not send him away from his home? He had no cause. Rashid was always punctual and obedient. And Ahmed Karn was just, like a true Muslim, and he never allowed himself to offend a coreligionist without cause. Oh, Allah is omniscient! Allah is omnipotent! Allah knows everything, even our most secret thoughts, and no one can escape his righteous indignation. Besides, Rashid was a very useful assistant.

II. There is an ancient mosque in Damascus. It stands at the very end of the eternal city and looks beautiful in the distance with the cupolas of its numerous edifices.

Mosques are usually built near the centre of the city to make it convenient for the faithful to come to prayer at the first sound of the holy call. But why is this mosque located at the end of the city of Damascus?

According to an old legend the Caliph had ordered the Governor of Damascus to build a court house on that spot.

"Let the court of justice be removed from the city; then there will be fewer complaints, for he who will make up his mind to start a lawsuit will go to the outskirts of the city and cool off on the way, may return and be reconciled with his opponent without going to court. But the mosque must be in the centre of the city, that each and every faithful believer may go there at the first call and make his prayers to the great God."

Thus ordered the wise Caliph; but the disloyal Governor did not obey his order. He did exactly the reverse; he built the court house in the centre of the city and the mosque he built far away, amid the cypress trees and the apricots, over the swift currents of the Barada River. The Governor had his own reasons for this; he wanted the people to sue each other frequently and thus he would derive a larger income. When the Caliph had learned of this he ordered that the Governor of Damascus be beheaded in the yard of the mosque he had built.

Thus a great mosque was founded there. Everything remained strong and beautiful there to this day, but the two minarets at the main building had grown old and looked as though ready to fall at any moment.

The elders of the city gathered in the mosque to decide what to do; they prayed, talked, collected money and decided to destroy the old minarets and erect two new minarets which would adorn the old edifice.

Who was to be commissioned to build the minarets? All named Ahmed Karn.

They sent for Ahmed Karn. He entered the spacious yard of the mosque proud of his art, as usual, conscious of his power. He greeted the gathering respectfully yet with dignity and asked the elders what they wanted him to do, as though he had not suspected anything.

"Then one of the sheikhs cleared his throat, stroked his gray beard and said slowly: "We have gathered here for the glory of the great God and His prophet Mohammed—and may the Lord be merciful to us and may he guard him. We have decided to build two new minarets near this glorious mosque. For that purpose we have resolved to invite an expert builder who could restore to the old building its former and perhaps even better appearance. We know that you can carry out our ideas and we have therefore decided to entrust the work to you."

Ahmed Karn at first regarded it as his duty to decline the offer in order to add to the solemnness of the occasion.

"Noble sheikhs! You have done me great honor, but I am growing old and I no longer rely upon my powers as before. Find some one else who could maintain the glory of the ancient master builders by his art. And I would admire his work."

A faint smile played over his lips. The assembled elders grew agitated. They all began to implore Ahmed to accept the offer, to undertake the work and to make his name famous for all ages.

Ahmed accepted. They discussed the price, drank coffee, prayed and went home.

The entire city waited impatiently for the beginning of the work on the minarets. All the people were wondering how Ahmed Karn would distinguish himself this time. For a long time blocks of white and black rocks were carried to the mosque by camels, mules and donkeys. It took some time to pull down the old minarets and clear the sites for the new. The workmen were hewing the stones for a long time and resting on the shore of the Barada during the hot midday in Damascus.

Finally Ahmed Karn commenced his work. He carefully placed stone upon stone, measuring them with his rule and his lead wire; he stood on the ground, now closing his right eye, now his left, looking at the wall, shading his eyes with his hand, and with his feet, and then he got up on the wall again and placed stone upon stone with great precision.

Rashid always helped him in his work. He handed his master the ruler, the lead wire, he placed the stones according to his directions. But he did all this sternly and silently. He had never before been too talkative, but now he would hardly utter two words during the day. He had rarely looked upon other people with kindness before, but now there was an evil fire in his eyes. He was forever absorbed in thought. Sometimes he did not even hear when his master called him.

The workmen were hewing the rocks.

Ahmed Karn and Rashid were building the walls and the minaret was growing and growing. Ahmed Karn and Rashid were becoming ever smaller and smaller. At last it seemed as though two black ants were crawling along the walls of the new minaret.

"Ahmed wants the minaret to reach the sky. Isn't it tall enough, Ahmed?" his friends and acquaintances asked.

Ahmed Karn only smiled in answer.

But soon Ahmed built around the minaret a platform for the muezzin, then he made the balustrade for the platform and finally commenced to work on the roof.

The roof was also ready shortly and the divine crescent flashed against the deep southern sky. The minaret stood out above the mass of old structures pure and bright like a bride.

Passersby heaved sighs of admiration and praised Ahmed Karn.

"Oh, great God! What skill! God is our witness, we have not seen such a beautiful minaret even in Mecca! How will the second minaret look?"

Friday arrived. And from the tall minaret the call to prayer resounded over the city.

knowing what had really happened. Only Ahmed Karn stood silent and motionless, dumfounded. Now he knew why Rashid had always looked at him so strangely and with animosity in his eye. Rashid had been tormented by envy. He wished to be his equal, he wished to be even greater than his master!

The crowd calmed down little by little. The wiser and older men wanted to ignore Rashid and believed that Ahmed Karn should complete the work on the minarets. But the younger element insisted that the second minaret be built by Rashid.

"What if he should spoil it completely?" asked the older people.

But Rashid settled this question. As a security that he would not make the second minaret worse than the first he offered his savings for many years, a hundred gold pieces of a hundred piastres each. Then all agreed to give the work to him. Ahmed interrupted all discussions by announcing publicly that he declined to continue working on the minarets in order to see the work of his pupil and to rejoice if Rashid's promises are fulfilled.

The crowd dispersed slowly. Rashid was to start his work on the second minaret on the following day.

III. The entire city was seized with a sensation of curiosity. What would be the result of the contest between the two builders? Wagers were made and even women and children came to the mosque and argued endlessly about the rival builders.

Rashid kept working. He did not look at the people; he spoke to no one except the masons. He had grown thin and pale. He did not rest in the daytime and did not show himself anywhere in the city on Fridays.

He spent his days and his nights and his holidays upon the structure; he slept in his minaret and his bed was raised ever higher and higher toward the blue sky.

Ahmed Karn stayed at home. He did not go even to the mosque. When he

fallen across the city and Damascus slept quietly beneath them.

The narrow streets and the bazars were deserted. Lamps were flickering faintly here and there in the darkness. Dark shadows were whispering something in the narrow side streets and under the vaults of many centuries buildings. An occasional passerby looked around timidly, listening to these mysterious whisperings and watching the movements of the shadows.

It was near midnight, the most quiet hour of the night in Damascus. Some one was walking along the street. He looked around on all sides, like a thief, like a lover going stealthily to his beloved. He tried to avoid the light of the kerosene lanterns. At the corner of a street his face was illuminated. It was Ahmed Karn. His hands and his feet were trembling; his eyes were burning. He walked as though intoxicated, staggering from side to side. He directed his steps to the mosque, to the two minarets. He entered the open gate and disappeared amid the verdure of the trees there.

Suddenly some one sang in a shrill, loud voice: "It is the muezzin on the Al-Amul minaret singing the midnight call to prayer."

About a hundred and fifty voices from all parts of Damascus responded. And soon the mournful song of the muezzins rang in the cool air of the city.

Now the muezzin on Rashid's tall minaret also commenced to sing: "Great is God! Great is God! There is no God except the one God!"

Ahmed Karn shuddered at the first sound of this song and looked up.

"Ah! He is singing on Rashid's minaret! Mine is bad and crooked!"

And he sank to the cold stones in the yard and listened. Only under the burning southern sky in the desert such a sad melody could be brought forth.

And it seemed to Ahmed that the muezzin sang instead of his prayer quite another song:

"All in earth will pass away * * * There is nothing eternal. Only the great God is eternal! Rivers will dry up and change their course, cities will turn into ash; nations will disappear; mountains will crumble away, and the greatest glory will grow dim!"

"Do you remember, O Damascus, your former glory? Have you forgotten your great Caliphs? Do you see them at least in your dreams in the soft shadows of the night? Have you forgotten your glory, have you bent your head powerless? Do you hear how your singers, the muezzins, are singing on the high minarets which are as graceful as your most graceful women? They are peering into the darkness. They are looking to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, they are looking toward the holy city. They see the whole world from there! * * * All is quiet. * * * All are sleeping peacefully and free from care."

And then the sad song of the muezzin grew still more mournful. It rose above the mute and motionless mountains and like a wounded bird it fell back to the ground.

"O Damascus, the most beautiful women in the world no longer come to your ever rustling streams. The silver water spray does not fall upon their bare shoulders, and the divine laughter of the women of the harem does not accompany the sound of the fountain. The shadows of the night have muffled the city and have brought beautiful dreams upon their wings. Rise, ye faithful ones, come to prayer, come to the road of salvation and success! Great is God! Great is God, and there is no God except the one God!"

The muezzin became silent. The night watchman struck his stick against a dry board. A dog barked. The water splashed in the reservoir and reflected the starlit sky.

And the sounds of the muezzin's song rose heavenward, ringing in the air, until the sensitive mountains fell asleep again and the faint echoes died out.

Descending from the minaret, the muezzin noticed that some one had quickly rushed into the other minaret and was running up the stony stairs. He quickened his pace and whispered:

"I pray God to save us from the devil!"

And he hastened to close the door of the minaret.

In the morning the entire city was in a state of agitation. In the yard of the old mosque lay the body of Ahmed Karn. He had hurled himself to the pavement from the top of the minaret he had built. All the people went to the mosque to look at the former master builder and to show him the last honors.

Rashid also came. Upon noticing the body of his master he bowed to the ground, kissed his cold wrinkled hand and walked away without saying a single word.

Since that time no one ever saw Rashid in Damascus.

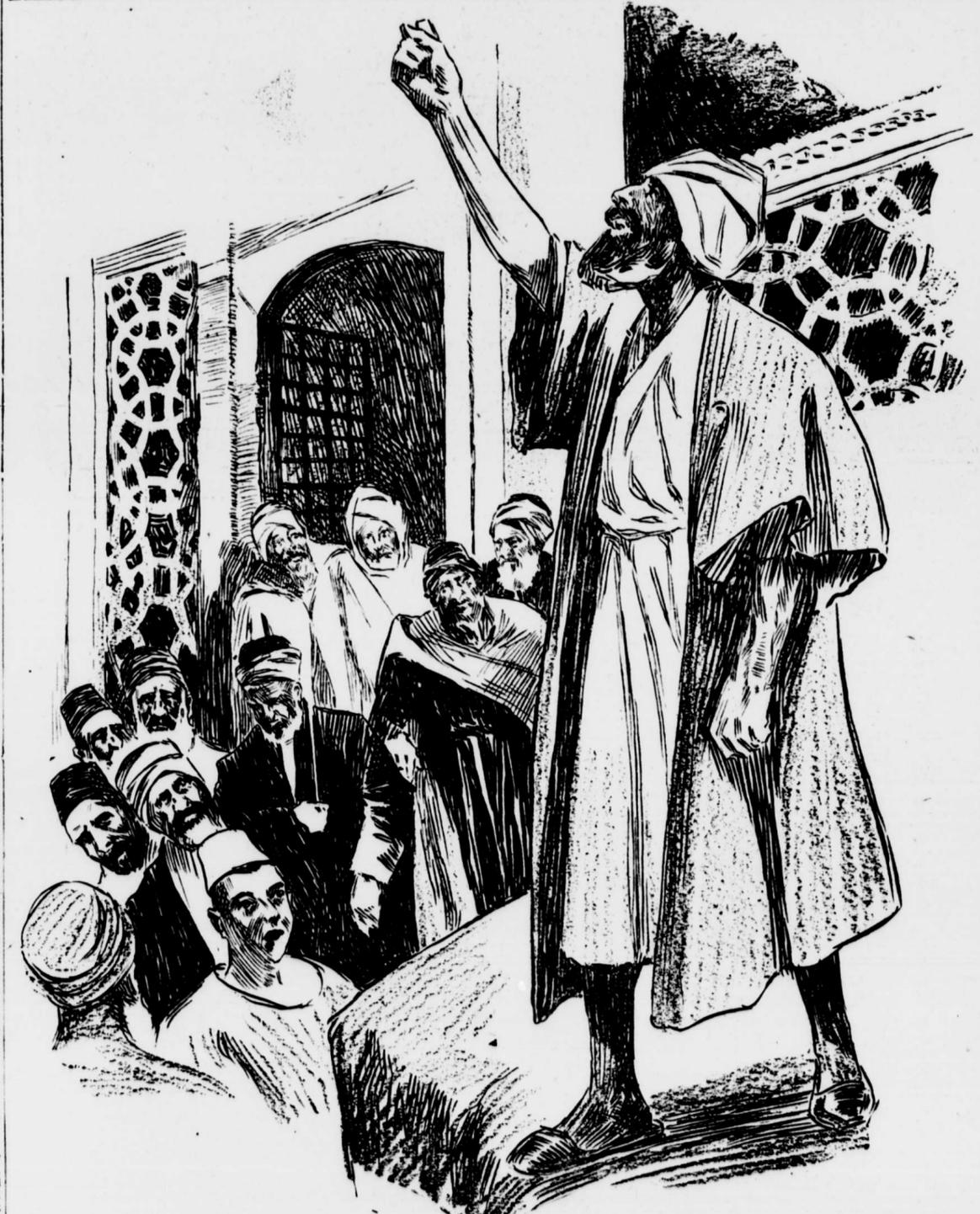
And the two minarets stand to this day in Damascus, one lower, older, somewhat bent, and the other tall and stately, as though built yesterday.

"Great is God! Great is God! Great is God! There is no God except the one God, Mohammed was the messenger of God. Come to prayer; come to the road of salvation and success. Great is God! Great is God!"

The faithful Mohammedans rushed toward the mosque in crowds. All wanted to examine the minaret and to hear what the sheikhs would say.

After the prayers the crowd gathered in the large courtyard of the mosque. The sun was shining brightly in the blue sky and its rays were reflected in all colors in the jets of the great fountain. A sea of heads in red fezes and white head dresses was stirring in the yard. The heads were thrown back, the beards were raised as the people looked at the new minaret which stood out beautifully against the background of the blue sky. Everybody admired the wonderful work and praised Ahmed Karn.

And Ahmed stood near the door of the mosque with the sheikhs of the city; he was happy over his success. This was



"FAITHFUL MOHAMMEDANS!" CRIED RASHID, RAISING HIS CLENCHED FIST SKYWARD.

heard the call to prayer he spread a little rug in the yard of his house and prayed fervently. He was waiting to see the complete work of his rival. He hoped that Rashid's minaret would not be as good as the one he had built.

Ahmed's friends and relatives came to him and told him about the progress of Rashid's work. At first they laughed at Rashid, calling him "a new star." But as time elapsed their jests grew forced and rare. Ahmed felt that they were concealing something from him and he became still more uneasy. Strong and vigorous until then, Ahmed aged and turned gray in a few months.

Finally he learned that Rashid had completed his minaret.

Friday arrived.

Ahmed Karn came out of his house, his heart beating very fast, as he turned to the mosque, whither crowds of people were flocking. He walked along the narrow streets, his eyes lowered to the ground; he was reading verses from the

new minaret, beautiful and stately, like an angel beside a clumsy old man. And it seemed to Ahmed that his minaret experienced the same feeling. The new, young, insolent fellow had crushed the joy out of both, had dimmed their light.

Ahmed Karn did not even notice that all the people had left the mosque. He came to himself only when in answer to some one's words the crowd roared good naturedly and joyously.

"They must be praising Rashid," thought Ahmed as he walked into the yard silently.

The crowd grew silent upon noticing Ahmed Karn. He looked around confusedly. All were silent. He turned toward the exit. The crowd maintained silence and followed him with their eyes to the gates. As soon as he had left the yard of the mosque, behind the huge iron door, the crowd roared again joyously.

IV. It was a quiet summer night in Damascus. Light, transparent shadows had

fallen across the city and Damascus slept quietly beneath them.

The narrow streets and the bazars were deserted. Lamps were flickering faintly here and there in the darkness. Dark shadows were whispering something in the narrow side streets and under the vaults of many centuries buildings. An occasional passerby looked around timidly, listening to these mysterious whisperings and watching the movements of the shadows.

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Spanish Gypsies.

About 58,000 of Them Said to Be in the Country Now.

One of the things to attract the notice of every traveler that visits Spain is that strange race which he finds scattered here and there in small groups in the remote rural districts or near the great centres of population. It presents a type that can be mistaken for no other in the Spanish dominions.

The lips thick, the eyes large, black and piercing, the hair long, black and straight, the complexion olive tinted, the Spanish gipsy, whether encamped in a sheltering ravine or under the arches of an aqueduct or in the shadow of an overhanging cliff, is indeed Spanish because born in Spain, but in all else he is a gipsy.

Time was when Spaniards of the true blue blood called gypsies "New Castilians" or "Egyptians" or "Mooreish footpads"; but while their traits have undergone no change their name is now definitely gitanos, or gisies.

Between fifty and sixty thousand is the number of these people in Spain, says America. Most of them have no fixed abode; but in some parts, and notably in Andalusia, there are several small settlements, for towns they can hardly be called, where these wanderers have taken possession of caves in the mountain side, whence they sallied forth to tell fortunes and to fish. Wherever they are, they are inclined to quarrelsome among themselves and to enforce their arguments by means of wicked looking knives, which they wield with great dexterity.

Children Attacked by Big Owl.

From the Detroit Journal.

A large owl, apparently angered by its failure to capture any of the persons at the farmhouse of Mrs. Nels Anderson, near Carney, Mich., attacked little children, who were coasting at the time.

The children sought safety by running into the house, but the owl finally saw and killed. It measured five feet from tip to tip of its wings. This is said to be the largest owl record that an owl has attacked human beings.