

Talisman (An Arabian Amulet) by Dr. Irum Alvi

Talisman (An Arabian Amulet) – a story

The moon was full, the night foggy and chilly. The alarm went off suddenly. The blaring sound echoed in the still air. The sound came from the crude security system which was installed at the Old Haveli. Vikram, the security guard, an old wizened man was on his night shift. Today, as always. He was the night guard. All had forewarned him to quit but he didn't—he couldn't. Anyone unfettered by financial concerns couldn't understand why—he needed the money badly and the amount the Nawab paid was high, much higher than anything else. He reached for his old rusty bicycle and went up the wet gravel driveway. The bald tires of the bicycle made a strange sound as he raced to reach the gate as quickly as possible. "This noise is enough to drive away even ghosts," he beamed a smile. Within minutes, he reached there. He looked around with old yet piercing eyes. He was a night guard for years now. He was supposed to be sharp, vigilant and watchful. His was the duty to protect the Old Haveli from intruders. He got paid for it. He knew his job all too well. He picked the lantern which was dangling on the handle of his bicycle. Old, flickering, rusty, yet heavy. He knew he could use it to defend himself if there was a need. The light from the lantern looked like a fan against the darkness that engulfed the Old Haveli which stood still, looking lonely like an orphan.

The tamarind trees, bordering the lawns of the Old Haveli swayed gently, singing gray lullabies. Listening to the drone of insects, and the buzzing of the mosquitoes, while the moonlight threw boogieing specks of light through the leaves of the tree, he whirled along the unpaved pathways; the air was heavy with the scent of marigold flowers. The Nawab, owner of the Old Haveli had not been very kind towards Vikram. Other than the old rusty bicycle and old rusty lantern, he had provided him with a uniform, a *pagdi* and a lathi; after all he was the night guard.

He was supposed to look intimidating to be able to ward off the intruders, mainly the kids who happened to enter the premises for the sake of an adventure. During the time that Vikram had been working as the night guard, he had already chased away few trespassers, mostly teenagers in quest for adventure who ran away chuckling as he chased them limping, cursing them. They were always faster than him.

Today seemed somehow different. The Old Haveli had an ominous air as if something ill-omen was about to happen. Vikram was determined that nothing should happen to spoil his image in the eyes of the Nawab. He silently prayed nothing would happen during his watch. The flickering light of the lantern made the Old Haveli look more like an abandoned Bollywood set, all set for the shooting of a horror film. It was surrounded by barbed wires, a kind of fence, clearly demarcating the area from the neighboring houses in the vicinity. Vikram reached the heavy Iron Gate, now swinging softly. Vikram was now sure someone had entered the premises; the chain was open and swung to and fro like pendulum. He opened the gate wider; it creaked sending a shudder down his backbone. As he neared the Old Haveli he felt something. Some movements inside. Was someone searching for the hidden treasure, the villagers talked about it so often? He tried harder, concentrating, holding his breath. Nothing. He moved on cautiously. Several years as security guard, had given him training. He sensed something was wrong. Intuition. He gripped the lantern tightly in his left hand; his right hand clutched the lathi, so hard his fingers felt numb. He had a small rope tied to his waist; he could have tied the trespassers, only he never caught one. Age. Ailments. All took their toll. He needed the money for his family the night shift was the only solution. Determined to sacrifice for his family, he sacrificed his sleep. Now sleep was miles away from his eyes, eyes that darted into the dark.

Vikram was sure someone was there. He moved on. The dried grass squeaked under his feet. Suddenly, he stepped on glass; the pieces lay scattered near the frame of what once had been a beautifully carved window. He thought it must be

the kids again or the stray animals...the cats, the dogs, the hyenas...the list was endless. He might be confused but was certain about one thing. He needed to move with caution. The closer he got to the Old Haveli the more certain he was. He used his lathi to make noise, beating, making sounds to ward off the stray animals or... Whatever it was! Nothing. The Sounds continued. He had to know what or who was inside the Old Haveli. He stepped inside, bending his head to avoid bumping against the fallen beam. The air was damp. The floor shaky...or was it his imagination. The dark walls covered with dust and moss stood as if defying time. Vikram heard some sounds again. Someone was there. The sounds were coming from the upper floor, which consisted of labyrinthine passages, the "*bhul-bhuliaya*" and he remembered how years ago visitors are challenged to find their way out of the maze. Few ever succeeded and he had to come to their rescue several times. He tried to pull himself together; reassuring him it was merely the acoustics for which the Old Haveli was famous. A whisper against one wall could be picked up beyond several turns and twists of the corridors. Always suspicious of conspiracies, this how the Nawabs' family had guarded against deceit.

Vikram held his lantern high, the dim light flashed on the walls making strange and queer shapes. Scary! He remembered the rumors he had heard from the villagers, he could imagine the things that resided in there lurking in the dark labyrinths. The walls seemed to cave in. The world seemed to close upon him. "Oh God! It's my imagination". Vikram muttered. His own voice seemed to be coming from the other side of the grave. Some other world. He went on, from here he could see Lucknow, the city in the distance with its domes and minarets dominating the skyline, bathed in the glow of moonlight, a dreamy "*Arabian Nights*", akin to the landscape of old romances, ancient hatreds, tarnished dreams and fleeting glory. He heard something again. A still silent slithering as if someone slipped past him. The sound, it was coming from the far corner of the room, the Drawing room... now only a cluttered space filled with defunct objects. He felt he saw something. Someone? A shadow? A shape? He tried to appear brave, must be a figment of his imagination.

"Yeah", someone was definitely there, trying to move the debris, the clutter, as if trying to find something in the wreckage. Ransacking for the hidden treasure? "Oh, so there is some truth in the rumors after all", he thought. Mustering all courage, he stepped forth." You Stop! Come out! What are you doing? Don't you know this is trespassing?"

He clutched the lathi harder. "I will catch this intruder", he decided. In the yellow light of the lantern, Vikram saw a small petite woman. She stood up, moved gracefully, slowly towards him. She didn't run like the kids, didn't panic like them, which made him even more nervous. She looked strange as if from another era. Her clothes were mismatch and covered with dust. Had she stolen them too from the villagers or had she wrapped herself with the fabric of the curtains that adorned the windows of the Old Haveli. He wasn't sure. "What's going on?" He decided he will find out the truth. He held the lantern closer to the woman's face. She did look dirty, unkempt but young? "Great!" he thought some young vagrant ransacking the Old Haveli for antiques. "What are you doing here? This is no place for a woman?"

"Yes, it is", she replied. Vikram was stunned. "You are not supposed to be here,"

"Yes, I am." the woman replied, "I am," she insisted. Vikram took a step closer and in the dim light of the lantern, saw she looked sick, grey. The surroundings too seemed shrouded in the grey dust of crumbling masonry as if the place held the miasma of death.

"Looks like you need a doctor", he said.

"No, What I need is in here", she said, "in this Old Haveli."

She pointed towards the wall. Vikram's gaze followed, he saw an old family portrait that hung on the wall. He saw striking resemblance between the woman and the lady in the portrait. "Who is she?" he wondered. She could be some distant relative of the Nawab's family. Shocked. He tried to make a guess but that doesn't allow her to come here in the dead of night, he thought angrily.

"That means nothing to me. I am going to take you to the Nawab and let him decide."

"No," her voice shook. "You are disturbing me. Please don't disturb me", she pleaded.

"I don't think I am," indignantly he said.

"Don't disturb me. I don't have much time".

Vikram turned towards the portrait on the wall to take a closer look. It looked blurred, he tried to wipe the dust, and the portrait fell on the floor with a loud sound. The woman turned around and came hastily towards the portrait. She seemed to have found what she was searching for. There was a safe behind it. He swallowed hard.

"Please, I don't have much time", she said. He held the lathi in front of the woman, stopping her.

"We will take all the time we need. I will take you to the Nawab and settle this matter."

The woman took a deep sigh, as she moved towards the safe. He tried to stop her.

"Don't touch me."

Angry. He caught her hand trying to stop her. Her skin felt strange. "Oh God!" he said, "What is this?" he withdrew his hand immediately, as a cold shudder ran through him.

"I told you, don't touch me", the woman looked at him with dismay.

"What is this? Who are you?" Vikram stared at his hand, moving back... Horrified.

Suddenly, his palm burned as if the fires of hell has broken loose and were eating him alive. "Oh God!" he staggered. Unstable. Unsteady. Unbalanced. The lantern dropped from his hand. The burning sensation shot up, through his arm, to his

shoulder, to his heart... his entire body as if consumed with fire. An invisible Blazing Fire!

"I told you not to touch me," she said as she watched him groan, moan, writhe in pain. He screamed. Seizures till he could no longer think. Flashes till he could no longer see. Spasm till he could no longer feel. He dropped to the ground. The woman turned away as if unable to endure his excruciating pain. The lantern illuminated the corner of the room. She could see him still shaking, twisting, dying. She turned her attention towards the safe. It was locked. She looked at the family portrait lying on the floor, Nawab Ali Khan, his wife Bismillah Khanum and their only daughter and she knew what could be the code. Bismillah, She quickly clicked the numbers that make the word in Arabic; she heard the cylinders click into position but the door refused to open. She used all her might to chip free the rust that had caked in the cracks. The door opened. Nothing. There was nothing. Someone had already emptied the safe. She needed it to free herself from the curse. The curse killed whoever came close to her, who touched her. She swirled towards Vikram who lay dying on the floor. She looked bereft of hope. Her hope lay in the safe, at least she thought so. Gone. Lost. Forever. Now what will she do? She picked up the old frame, the portrait fading at the edges; she took it out through the shattered glass and held it close to her heart. Her family portrait. She turned it, she stood up. She knew she had found it. She believed she would find it. Finally, she had found it. Behind the portrait was the *taweez, nuska*. Just before she died her mother, *Bismillah Khanum*, had whispered the secret in her ears, an amulet made in the ancient traditions of the Arabs, verses on a piece of checkered paper containing compressed energy, energy so powerful that it could destroy the *Sahir*, the most ancient type of black magic. She had searched every nook and corner, he helped her find it. She looked at Vikram's dead body. She hoped he was the last person to die from her curse.

The moon was full. She left hurriedly. She didn't have much time. She had to bury it in the graveyard in her deceitful stepmother's grave who had cursed her to take revenge.



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