

DEATH HAS A FLING IN SAMARRA

By John A. Rickard

‘HELL and damnation!’ cried the Archangel Michael fluttering his wing feathers
‘We’re heading for trouble – serious trouble!’

‘What do you mean?’ asked his brother, the Archangel Gabriel, who was busy, as usual, polishing his horn.

‘Our brother Death is riding into a cosmic storm in Samarra,’ Michael said.

‘How do you know?’ asked Gabriel.

‘I felt a cold shiver in my wing feathers – like someone stepping on my grave, if ever I were ever to have such a thing as a grave. Which I won’t – ever.’ Then he added, ‘And, of course, our brother has sometimes had problems with appointments in Samarra. And right now he’s heading for that city.’

‘Why doesn’t The Supreme Being intervene?’ asked Gabriel. ‘He is after all the Omnipotent, Everywhere, Always, Being.’

‘You forget,’ whispered Michael, ‘He sometimes likes a nap – and I guess he’s dozing now!’

Death was this time travelling in the guise of a young sheikh. As was to be expected, he was rich and handsome and also, as he rode his finest camel to Samarra, bored out of his skull. He had an appointment in Samarra – but then there was hardly a time when he did not have an appointment in the town and everywhere else on the planet.

Death did not need a camel, or any other form of transport for that matter. Death – like the Creator and that Other One – was eternal and occupied all of Creation. He was the shadow of all things that had lived and would live. But like the Other One he sometimes liked to manifest himself as a personality.

And so, rolling, swaying with the beat of the camel’s steady movement, Death moved towards his next appointment and thought, ‘All that fuss made because someone once bumped into me in Baghdad market and thought to evade me by fleeing to Samarra.’

‘The foolish fellow! It was in Samarra that our appointment was fixed! As though any mortal creature can evade an appointment with me – the Shadow of all living things!’

(Death recalled he’d once, in a moment of absent-mindedness, had a major engagement in Samarra – but had visited Sodom and Gomorrah instead. At the time it had caused quite a stir, in one way and another. As he had explained to the Archangel Michael at the inquest called by The Supreme Being he was sometimes hard of hearing. At that time, as always when at an assembly of the Higher Authority, he was down to his *natural* or stripped to the bones state. So it was obvious to the most casual of observers why Death might have a problem with his hearing. The Archangel, who was *not* a casual observer of anything, nodded in the direction of the two holes in the side of Death’s bony head, and said, ‘How can you hear anything at all – when you are in what might be called your identifiable persona?’

(‘With difficulty!’ replied Death with a sigh that sounded like wintry midnight winds souging through all the cemeteries of all the worlds. ‘I once suggested a permanent transformation – proper bone ears, not holes through the bone. He refused, most strongly it seemed to me. Said it would be unseemly. I thought He was indignant that anyone should question anything He had designed – although it’s difficult to tell his moods when He’s in invisible mode.’)

In Samarra, the one Death was to meet was furious with herself and the world. But most of her fury was reserved for the Sultan – the man who had condemned her the previous evening to entertain the city’s rabble by having her head parted from her body. Such a pretty head -- such a beautiful body. It was said she had the face of an angel and the body of a *houri*, the delectable creatures assigned to entertain good men in paradise. She had extraordinary, beautiful fingers. It was the fingers that had got her into trouble.

Although no one knew from whom she had inherited her spectacular beauty, for her parents were exceedingly ugly, it was well known who she had to thank for the dexterity of her supple fingers – her mother and father. They had been the most skilful pickpockets in Baghdad before being forced by circumstances beyond their control (the growing interest in their affairs of the Caliph’s police) to retire to Samarra where they operated less flamboyantly and at a more modest (and safer) level.

Jazreel had learned the family trade well and her skill had kept her out of reach of the law until, dipping her hand in what she had assumed to be a pocket containing an elderly man's purse, she found a sleeping mongoose. The man's pet, irritated at being disturbed, nipped the intrusive fingers.

Jazreel's screams (for it must be remembered she was then only 13 and in her innocence assumed she had encountered a ferocious imp) led to her undoing – and three years as guest of the Sultan.

The Sultan was not a particularly bad Sultan – as Sultan's go. But after 50 years as ruler, all the wine, women and songs that he could command in all their varieties and in any quantity, had long since left him satiated. The need to overcome his boredom sometimes made him forget the first requirement of a great lord – compassion.

At 13 Jazreel was showing the first blooming of the beauty that was to flower to perfection at 16. There was no fear in the eyes or the face of the kneeling girl as she looked up to her judge. 'Why do you engage in such wickedness?' asked the Sultan, sucking at a sherbet straw.

'I need to eat,' replied Jazreel. 'And I prefer stealing to selling my virtue.'

'Some people might applaud you for putting such high value on your virtue,' the Sultan said. 'But as the ruler of a harem occupied in large part by young ladies whose virtue was easily sold by themselves – or their impecunious relatives – I myself cannot applaud the defence of your honour without seeming to diminish that of the ladies in my household.'

He sniffed. 'I could cut off your tongue for the lesser crime that its sharpness offends my ears. For the greater crime, putting your hand in a rich man's pocket, I ought, by right, to cut your head off.'

He coughed. 'By this I do not mean *I* personally will cut off your head. I leave such matters to my executioners. The sight of blood makes me somewhat nauseous.' Jazreel, who had been rubbing her neck in an agitated manner, as though already feeling the sting of the executioner's scimitar, said, her voice full of synthetic sympathy for her unfortunate ruler, 'I know how you feel – for I suffer in a similar fashion. The merest cut gets me all queasy. I've always found two drops of rancid garlic juice mixed with lemon juice a great help – it was a recipe given to me by mother.'

‘It’s a pity your mother didn’t help you more by teaching you that stealing another’s goods is a sin – and more to the point it is against *my* laws.’

Jazreel had no reply to this homily – at least not one that would have been of any use. Her mother *had* taught her that stealing was a sin and a violation of the law. And that is *why* her mother had emphasised again and again YOU MUST NOT BE CAUGHT! Jazreel, showing tact beyond her years, did not contradict the Sultan’s homily.

‘You are so young, a child without a protector, so I am inclined to be merciful,’ the Sultan said. (Jazreel did not contradict him about lack of a protector).

‘That sharp tongue of yours puts me in mind of an ancestor of mine who was persuaded to mercy through the story telling talents of Scheherazade, daughter of my ancestor’s Grand Vizier. Each night, for one thousand and one nights, her stories kept the Sultan enthralled until finally his anger was abated and the executioner’s sword was put into permanent disuse. You have heard, no doubt, of the Tales of the 1,001 Nights?’

Jazreel nodded.

The Sultan said, ‘As a gesture of mercy, the sword of justice will remain for the time being in its scabbard and I sentence you to a period of story telling. The rules are as follows: You will begin your tale at exactly the same time each evening – one hour after evening prayers; each story will last not less than 30 minutes; no story is to be repeated. Obey all the rules – and at the conclusion of the 1,001st story you will be free to leave. In the meantime you will live in the palace – under guard. Do you accept?’

There was no hesitation – Jazreel needed no time to spot the smallest of escape holes. ‘Yes, O high and mighty one!’ cried Jazreel who knew she had no choice – and had a great horde of stories collected from her years on the street. She also had no doubt of learning more.

Jazreel was by nature an optimist. Indeed, optimism was an essential part of her nature. It had to be for any girl who each day for years had surreptitiously slipped her hands into the pockets of strangers. And the thought had crossed her mind that the elderly, obese Sultan might very well run out of breath and vital signs long before she ran out of stories.

‘You will begin tomorrow – one hour after evening prayers,’ said the Sultan. And so it was arranged.

It was not an auspicious start to the 1,001 Nights (Revised Version). The Sultan was in a state of discomfort – indigestion brought on by a surfeit of sherbet, so his physician said. But more likely an attack by a malevolent genie – that was the Sultan’s opinion. And Jazreel’s choice of story did not please him.

‘My story,’ Jazreel announced, ‘is “The Romance of the Cockroach and the Princess.”’

The Sultan grunted. ‘I suppose this is one of those fairy tales – a kiss from the princess transforms some animal into a handsome lover. But a cockroach? Surely a bit down the scale of the animal kingdom? Unless it is a very special cockroach – perhaps a golden cockroach?’

‘It is nothing of the sort!’ said Jazreel. ‘It’s just a plain old black cockroach – the sort you see scuttling about in kitchens and cellars.’

The Sultan shuddered. ‘How disgusting – for anyone to kiss a dirty little cockroach.’

Jazreel said, ‘My princess does not kiss a little cockroach – it’s a large one!’

The Sultan snorted. ‘I can only assume your princess is half-witted – as well as half-blind.’

Jazreel snorted back. ‘She is neither – and may I say that I believe your continual interruptions are unfair – and a violation of the rules you yourself have set.’ The Sultan then grudgingly agreed. ‘Well, get on with it then,’ he commanded – so she did

The story is far too long to go into in detail. At one stage suffice it to say that the cockroach was turned into a handsome golden creature, because even a half-witted princess knows that large gold insects of any kind are better for kissing purposes than small black ones that have just crawled out of a slimy drain.

To cut a long story even shorter, the princess, whose favourite activity (apart from kissing) was cooking, spent a great deal of time in the kitchen, as a result of which she became acquainted with the cockroach, rescued it from a predatory cat, deciphered the KISS ME message written in the pastry flour (for the cockroach was a most literate creature, despite its natural drawbacks). The princess, who read the message clearly, for she was not half-blind and indeed had 20-20 eyesight, kissed the golden insect and got her handsome prince in exchange, thus baffling a female ghoul whose lecherous advances had been rebuffed by the virtuous prince.

The Sultan accepted Jazreel's first offering, but as with most rulers had to have the last word. 'Whoever heard of a princess spending a lot of time in a kitchen – any time at all, for that matter!'

And so Jazreel served her sentence, growing more beautiful each day, and dreaming each night of the start of a new life in the arms of *her* prince, preferably handsome, but quite acceptable if he came with plain features but the normal complement of legs and arms. And money.

On the 1,001st Night Jazreel prepared to greet her freedom – instead she ran headlong into disaster.

As was the custom, Jazreel bowed low to the Sultan, settled herself on a cushion below his throne and began her story, exactly on time, one hour after evening prayers. 'This story is entitled the "The Romance of the Princess and the Cockroach".....'

The Sultan, who was once more suffering agonies from a surfeit of sherbet, reared up from his throne, 'A mistake, a mistake,' he yelled, his voice filled with satisfaction. Then he paused, a look of astonishment passing across his face. 'You told the story before. But why?'

Jazreel battered her head with her clenched fists. 'I don't know! I don't know! I was not thinking straight. My mind was too taken up with the future, not the past!'

The Sultan shook his head, in mock sorrow. 'I am afraid now you have no future beyond one hour after evening prayers tomorrow, when you must meet the executioner in the Market Square.'

The next evening close to the appointed hour Death passed through the East Gate and rode straight to the Market Square, for although Death was sometimes hard of hearing his sense of direction and timing was perfect – he had no need to ask directions.

Jazreel, for the first time in her life really frightened, stood on the execution block, below her the laughing howling citizens who had come for their free entertainment – happily excited that it was not their head that was to roll to the ground. The warm evening air was laden with the sweat of the jostling crowds, the smoke from cooking fires, and roasting meats. Execution crowds are always hungry – for blood or bread.

Jazreel stood, hands tied, as the executioner casually sharpened his scimitar ready for the command to proceed. Jazreel eyed the execution block, with its hollowed out

top sizeable enough to accommodate all neck sizes. She was irritated to note that the hollowed wood was blackened and encrusted with blood.

‘I notice you take great care of the tool of your trade,’ she called to the executioner. ‘It’s a pity that you don’t take care of that tool as well,’ she said, glancing at the block. ‘It’s filthy!’

The executioner continued sharpening his scimitar. ‘No point,’ he said. ‘It’s used too often for cleaning.’

The Sultan was not present. As he had said on a former occasion, he was a soft-hearted man who disliked the sight of blood, so he had sent his Vizier to oversee the execution. As the Vizier rose from his cushions, signalled to the executioner, and the crowd grew silent, Death rode into the Market Square.

Death, the handsome young merchant, froze into grateful immobility as he surveyed the scene before him – his eyes fixed upon the girl. Despite the warmth of the evening, Jazreel stood shivering as the executioner approached. Death, in his guise as Ben Hazara, was transfixed by the beauty of the girl – a beauty that was so apparent to all who observed her, for in the matter of dress she had been left almost as naked as the day she was born.

Diaphanous trousers were all the girl wore. This was the fault of the Sultan’s No 1 Wife, a frugal soul, who had decreed that Jazreel should leave the palace with the minimum of apparel. For, as No 1 Wife said to her Number 2, the girl would *not* require any clothes where *she* was going – and the more clothes *she* wore the *more* would be spoiled by the *event*. Separating the head from the body with a scimitar was a most gory, blood splattering, clothes spoiling business.

She was not the first beautiful girl Death had seen – by the nature of things he had seen ALL of them, at every stage of their being. He had, after all, been there right from the start, in a manner of speaking. He was an Observer with other Higher Beings when The Supreme Being, always noted for a keen interest in recycling material (the waste not, want not policy, He called it) had whipped out a spare rib from his new creature Adam and converted it into the first woman.

Death recalled Eve had been a most beautiful woman – although her beauty was something that had escaped Adam’s notice until he’d bitten into that apple – at which

time Death ceased being an observer and became an active participant in the lives and deaths of Adam and Eve and all mankind.

After Eve there had been uncounted millions of women – but Jazreel, Jazreel was somehow so different. As she stood there trembling, her dark eyes glinting with tears, she captured Death's heart – and this rather surprised Death because up until that moment he'd never thought he'd had such a thing as a heart.... It was the first time Death had fallen (in any way at all) and if there had been a physical characteristic to his fall the rattling of his bones would have been heard in Baghdad.

As it was, the only sound was the flubba dub dub of the young Al Hazara's overheated heart as his eyes locked on the young beauty. He descended from his camel, gave a casual wave – leaving everyone in Samarra and environs frozen in time and space – with the exception of himself and Jazreel.

Jazreel stood amazed and awed on the execution platform as she surveyed the Market Square where nothing moved and all was silent. The Vizier stood, arm upraised, mouth open, caught at the start of the proclamation heralding death for the girl; the executioner looked startled and seemed to be struggling, in vain, to lift his scimitar. Hundreds in the square were caught in similar manner – many with food held un-tasted and un-chewed in their stilled mouths; speakers with words uncompleted. Jazreel herself remained silent and still as Al Hazara walked through the living dead, climbed the steps to the platform, bowed and said: 'I cannot tell you in words how completely and ardently I love you! Will you come with me – will you tarry with me a while? You have nothing to lose by leaving here.'

Jazreel was astonished. In a world that seemed as still and silent as it was the day before Creation came, this handsome young man with apparent supernatural power aroused mixed tumultuous emotions within her – one part an enormous sense of attraction, one part terror. Attraction won out and agreement to tarry followed, but not before she had asked, waving at the silent and stilled people in the square, 'Are you some sort of genie – a wizard?'

Death smiled (such a bright pearly smile, Jazreel thought). 'Something of the sort,' Death said in response to her question. 'But much more – so much more!'

One more wave of his hand and they were gone – in to the luxury of a palace apartment where for the first time Death and Jazreel explored the delights of love – day after day to the point of exhaustion (or what would have been the point of exhaustion for a Mortal lover).

The crowds in the Market Square resumed their eating, the chattering; the Vizier dropped his hand; the executioner ceased pulling on his scimitar – and like every person in the square they wondered what they were doing there. All went home in a puzzled state.

The crisis started that evening – for Death had vanished, and the natural order of things had gone with him. Living creatures were being born. But no living creature was dying. It was not only the layers out of the dead, the morticians and funeral pyre builders, who were annoyed. The powers that be, especially the Supreme Being, were extremely upset. And so an emergency meeting of the Powers was called.

Famine was the first to speak. ‘Without Death my work cannot continue.’

Pestilence said likewise.

War remained silent but ground *his* teeth in a rage.

The Archangel Michael shuffled his feet. The Archangel Gabriel moodily cleaned his horn. ‘How can Death hide from The Supreme Being?’ he asked Michael.

It was The Supreme Being himself who answered the question. His voice, echoing out of the Great Void, said, ‘Death comes in a multitude of guises – and when hidden is sometimes difficult to find. Even for The Supreme Being.’

(‘He seems to be saying He can’t be everywhere at once,’ Michael whispered to Gabriel).

‘It means no such thing!’ said The Supreme Being. ‘Aside from which, you forget my hearing is universal. As is My Voice! So listen carefully to it! Michael and Gabriel, you are the ones who must seek out your older brother. Death must return to his functions. Without Death the Laws of Life cannot prevail!’

It seemed to some there was a sense of satisfaction in His voice as He delivered His judgement to Michael and Gabriel: ‘Go find your Brother!’

And so the great Angels went in disguise to hunt for their brother. As they circled the world’s centre they discussed their problem.

‘Where is He, do you think?’ Michael asked Gabriel.

Gabriel, the streetwise musician, with a lifestyle more broadly based than Michael’s, said:

‘Death will not move far from Samarra.’

‘Why do you think so?’ asked Michael.

‘Well,’ said Gabriel, ‘think about it. Samarra was his last place of appointment – and He is likely to be still in that area.’

‘Why?’ asked Michael.

‘Death has never had much of an imagination.’

And so it came about that the Archangels, disguised as two beggars, found Death. For He was singing – singing so lustily, so full of joy – his pursuers had no difficulty in recognising his voice even as they stood beyond the walls of the palace.

‘The words of his song are full of jubilation,’ Michael said to Gabriel.

‘But note the undertone, he cannot escape it,’ said Gabriel.

‘What do you mean?’ Michael asked.

‘It is funereal, that undertone. It is weeping – not laughing. It is the anthem of the cemetery – not the wedding parlour,’ said Gabriel.

They had no trouble gaining entrance into the palace, for even in the guise of beggars some of their natural, overpowering majesty shone through and overwhelmed the servants. As they walked in and confronted Death and his lover they came in splendour as archangels, their great wings full spread. Jazreel promptly fainted.

Al Hazara/Death cleared his throat; he appeared embarrassed. ‘She has been fainting all the time during our love making,’ he said. ‘It’s all that sexual energy I have been transmitting – I understand this is common in lovers without previous experience.’

‘Especially those who have waited six millennia to get started,’ whispered the Archangel Michael to his colleague.

‘It is not something which either of us is qualified to speak about,’ replied the Archangel Gabriel.

‘Judging from the delight written on Al Hazara/Death’s face I wouldn’t mind qualifying,’ said Michael.

‘You should try it sometime,’ Death said.

‘You might find the eventual price you pay would be too high,’ Gabriel said to Michael.

‘I noticed when we came in the room that you were saying strange things to each other. What was it?’ Michael asked Death.

‘I asked Jazreel: “Do you love me?” She replied: “I love you.” This is something we did repeatedly,’ said Al Hazara/Death.

‘Why?’ asked Michael. ‘Why should the pair of you ask the question “Do you love me?” when you would both know the answers?’

Death sighed. ‘It is something rather wonderful – this human need for reaffirmation of what they already know with every atom of their being.’

Gabriel tooted his horn to indicate they should all return to *official* business. ‘The Supreme Being insists that you must end this affair – and return to your normal functions.’

‘I will not,’ said Al Hazara/Death. ‘I will not give up Jazreel.’

Jazreel had recovered from her fainting spell, and sat silently, her eyes starting from her head as she listened to the exchanges between her lover and their guests.

Gabriel fluttered his wings in resignation. ‘We will report what you say to the Supreme Being.’ Both angels vanished.

Jazreel gave a little scream. Al Hazara/Death took her hand and gently kissed her cheek. ‘It is time for me to reveal myself – but before I do remember I love you dearly.’

‘Can you be so monstrous?’ Jazreel asked.

‘Most people think so,’ he said. ‘But do remember when all humans examine themselves in front of a mirror that just beneath the surface there am I.’ And with that Al Hazara vanished as quickly as the Archangels and in his place Death stood revealed, uncovered.

Jazreel flinched, but did not turn her head away. ‘I understand – I still love you, but can you keep your Al Hazara features – I’ve grown accustomed to them.’

Death laughed. ‘I understand.’ And once more he was the young merchant.

There was an immediate response to Death’s rejection of The Supreme Being’s commands. ‘Return to your functions – or else!’ came the Voice from the Void, the words dripping like icy water into Death’s skull.

‘Or else what?’ asked Death.

‘You will lose all,’ said The Voice. ‘Return to your duties and you may keep your Jazreel.’

Death agreed. ‘We have won,’ said exultant Death to his lover.

Jazreel, who was mortal and so less trusting of the promises of The Supreme Being, said, ‘Are you sure you can accept His assurances?’

‘Of course,’ said Death, who ought to have known better.

Death resumed his duties – and while away the archangels returned to Jazreel and as she slept cast a spell on her so that she was transformed into an old woman, a very old woman. A woman on the point of death. ('For,' as Michael said to Gabriel, 'The Higher Being is not mocked.' 'At least, not often and with impunity', Gabriel responded – but it was a silent response).

Death returned to Samarra, for he had another appointment, this time with a very old woman. Death found her – a stranger in his palace. Unsuspecting he touched her, and she passed instantaneously out of life and into his realm. Death screamed with rage for at that moment of transformation he knew he had been tricked. But an icy cold inner voice whispered to Death: 'Do not be foolish – you may still have your Jazreel – if you accept my terms!'

'And they are what?' cried Death, the pain of all Creation's losses in his voice.

'I am indeed compassionate,' said The Supreme Being, 'and so I rule that once a year Death may return to Samarra for an Appointment – with Jazreel. For one night only.'

'That's hardly compassionate,' whispered the Archangel Michael to his brother Gabriel

The voice that interrupted him was that of a testy old man. 'I have not yet finished,' said The Supreme Being.

'Their annual night of love in their palace will be in their hearts and understanding as if it encompasses one whole year of time.'

Death thought about it. 'Does that mean Jazreel will always be with me? Or not?' he asked.

'Yes,' said the Supreme Being.

'I accept the terms,' cried Death – and vanished as he went off to again keep his never-ending appointments with all living creatures. Including his first and eternal love.

'Did The Supreme Being mean "Yes" or "No" when he answered our brother Death?' Michael asked Gabriel. 'He just said: "Yes". An answer meaning what?'

'Both,' said Gabriel, 'as He often does. He has allowed Death the appearance of reality – not reality itself.'

'Does that mean Jazreel is still dead?' Michael asked.

'Of course she is,' said Gabriel. 'But not in the world of dreams the Supreme Being has created for Death. She lives outside of time. There she will always live.'

Michael ruffled the feathers of his wings. ‘I wonder if you are right about that. And I wonder if The Supreme Being has taken all factors into account in His settlement of this matter? I foresee new troubles.’

‘Oh, dear!’ said Gabriel, playing a moody note or two on his horn. ‘Is Omnipotence slipping again?’ he whispered. ‘What can the trouble be?’

‘The agreement covered only Death and Jazreel,’ said Michael.

‘So?’ queried Gabriel.

‘There is a third party – a new interest,’ said Michael.

‘Who or what is it?’ asked Gabriel.

‘Jazreel is pregnant – she is carrying Death’s child. A new entity is entering the realm of Creation. It will be protected by its father,’ Michael said.

‘Hells bells!’ said Gabriel.

‘Exactly!’ said Michael.