**Ibn-Hakkan Al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth**

“They can be compared to a spider who builds his home”Alcorán, XXIX, 40

‘This, is the land of my ancestors’, said Dunraven with an extensive gesture which included misty stars in a clouded sky, a black moor, a sea and a majestic and decrepit building which resembled a stable in ruins.  
 Unwin, his companion, pulled out the smoke from his mouth and made some modest and approbatory sounds. It was the first afternoon of the summer of 1914, and being sick of the world without its dignity in danger, the two friends appreciated the solitude that the land in Cornwall offered. Dunraven was growing a dark beard. He was known to have written an epic poem that his contemporaries were almost unable to analyze and the theme of which was not, as of now, revealed to him either. Unwin had published a study about a theorem which Fermat[[1]](#footnote-1) had not written on the margin of Diophantus’[[2]](#footnote-2) page. Both of them, if it is still necessary to be mentioned, were young, distracted, and passionate.   
 ‘It will be a quarter of a century since the murder of Ibn-Hakkan Al-Bokhari[[3]](#footnote-3)- the warlord or king of who knows which Nilotic[[4]](#footnote-4) tribe. He was killed in the central chamber of that house at the hands of his cousin Zaid. Even at the end of all these years, the circumstances of his death remain mysterious’, Dunraven said.  
 ‘Why?’ Unwin asked meekly.  
 ‘For various reasons’, Dunraven replied, then added- ‘To begin with, the house is a labyrinth. Secondly, it was guarded by a slave and a lion. Thirdly, it hides a secret treasure. Fourthly, the murderer was dead when the murder occurred. Also …’  
 Being weary of it, Unwin stopped him. ‘Don’t add to the mysteries. The mysteries should be simple- like Poe’s *The* *Purloined Letter[[5]](#footnote-5)* or Zangwill’s *The Big Bow Mystery[[6]](#footnote-6).*’ Unwin told him.   
 ‘Or complex- like the universe ’, Dunraven replied, simply.  
 They had climbed the sandy hills and reached a labyrinth. Up close, the upright and infinite wall with non-cemented bricks seemed to them taller than a giant. Dunraven said that it was circular, but its area was so vast that the curve could not be perceived. Unwin remembered Nicholas of Cusa[[7]](#footnote-7), for whom all straight lines were an arc of an infinite circle. Around midnight, they discovered a dilapidated door which led to a dark and fearsome vestibule. Dunraven said that the interior of the house had many intersections which always turned to the right, and arrived in a little over an hour, to the center of the network. Unwin nodded in agreement. Their cautious steps resonated on the stone floor as the corridor forked into other narrower ones. The house appeared to want to drown them as the roof was too low. They had to walk one after the other through the complicated route in darkness. Unwin led the way. Being slowed down by the asperities and angles, he moved forward with the invisible wall flowing endlessly into his hand. Advancing slowly through the shadows, Unwin heard his friend tell him about the death of Ibn-Hakkan.   
 Dunraven narrated: ‘Perhaps, the oldest of my memories is of Ibn-Hakkan Al-Bokhari at the door of Pentreath. He was followed by a black man who was accompanied by a lion. They were undoubtedly the first black man and first lion that I laid my eyes on, except for those that I had read about in books. I was then only a child, but the wild beast, the colour of sun, and the man, the colour of night failed to impress me as much as Ibn-Hakkan. He appeared to be very tall, with sallow skin and squinted black eyes, a snippy nose, full lips, and a dyed beard. He had a strong chest and he walked boldly in silence. I went home and announced, “A king has arrived in a ship!” Later, when the masons were at work, they extended this title to name him the *King of Babel*.´  
 ‘The news about the stranger taking residence in Pentreath was received with pleasure, while the news of the extension and form of his house, with shock and outrage. It seemed unimaginable for a house to consist of a single room and miles and miles of corridors. “Such houses may be acceptable among the moors, but not among Christians”, the people said. Our rector, Mr. Allaby was a man of strange intelligence. He conveniently unburied the story of a king who was castigated by the Gods for constructing a labyrinth, and announced it from the pulpit during one of his sermons. On the Monday after the sermon, Ibn-Hakkan visited the rectory. The details of that brief meeting were not known then, but no subsequent sermon referred to the matter, and the moor was allowed to hire masons for the construction of the labyrinth. Years later, when Ibn-Hakkan died, Allaby informed the authorities of the details of that private meeting.’  
 ‘Ibn-Hakkan spoke these, or similar words: “No one can any longer condemn me for what I do. The blames that dishonour me are such that even if I chant the name of God for centuries, it will still not be enough to alleviate a single torment of mine; the blames that dishonor me are such that even if I slay them with these hands, it will not lessen the torments that the infinite Justice has destined for me. My name is known on every land; I´m Ibn-Hakkan Al-Bokhari, and I have governed the tribes of the desert with a single iron rod. For years, I have plundered them, with the help of my cousin Zaid. But God heard my hue-and-cry and tried to reveal it. My people were broke and stabbed, and I began to flee with the treasure I had robbed during my years of plundering. Zaid guided me to a tomb of some saint at the foot of a stony mountain. I ordered my slave to monitor the entrance to the desert. Zaid and I slept, exhausted. That night, a web of serpents seemed to imprison me.  
 I woke up in shock at dawn. At my side, Zaid was still asleep. The touch of a spider web against my skin was the cause of the nightmare. It pained me to see Zaid, the cowardly, caught in a peaceful slumber. *The treasure is not an infinite one, and he could demand a part of it*, I thought. In my belt, I had a dagger with a silver hilt. I pulled it out and pierced it through Zaid’s throat. He stammered a few words in agony which I could not understand. I watched him. He was dead. I was still afraid that he would get up again, so I ordered the slave to smash his face with a rock. Soon, we were under the sky and there came a day when we saw the sea. A lot of high ships were sailing in it. *A dead one cannot walk the waters*, I thought to myself. I decided to go in search of new lands. The first night of our sail, I dreamt that I killed Zaid. The same incident repeated, except that I could now understand his final words. He said: *Like you obliterate me now, I will obliterate you, no matter where you are*. I have sworn to thwart that threat; I will hide myself in the center of a labyrinth so that his ghost can never find me.”  
 Having said that, Ibn-Hakkan left, and Allaby tried to assume that the moor was demented and the absurd labyrinth was a clear testament and symbol of his dementia. But he soon realized that his assumption went well with the bizarre tale, not with the strong impression that Ibn-Hakkan created. Perhaps, such stories were common in the Egyptian deserts; perhaps, such rarities correspond less to a person and more to a culture (like Pliny’s[[8]](#footnote-8) dragons). In London, Allaby examined several old editions of *Times*, checked the real reason for the rebellion and for the subsequent defeat of Al-Bokhari and his vizier, who was known to be a coward.   
 The masons concluded that Al-Bokhari had settled himself in the center of the labyrinth. He was not seen much in town and at times Allaby feared that Zaid had already captured and annihilated him. At night, the winds would carry the roar of the lion and the ears of the sheepfold would clench with a familiar fear.   
 It had been three years since the construction of the strange house when the ship *Rose of Sharon* was anchored at the foot of the hills. It was a dawn in the month of October.  
 Around sunset, that very day, Ibn-Hakkan barged into Allaby’s house. He was overcome with terror and could hardly come to terms with the fact that Zaid had reached the labyrinth and his lion and slave were dead. He earnestly asked the authorities if they could protect him. But before Allaby could respond, he left the house, as if driven out by the same terror that had brought him to the house for the second and final time. Allaby, sitting alone in his library, was amazed at the fact that this timorous creature had overpowered the Iron Tribes in Sudan. He realized that a battle is one thing, while a murder, a whole other.   
 The next day, Ibn-Hakkan sailed a boat. It was later found out that he went to Suakin on the coast of the Red Sea. Allaby decided to head to the labyrinth as it was his duty to confirm the death of the slave. Ibn-Hakkan´s account in his breathless state had seemed unreal to Allaby, but a turn in one of the corridors led to a dead lion. Another passage led to the slave, also dead, and in the central chamber was Al-Bokhari, his face smashed. A chest with a nacre inlay lay at his feet. Its lock had been forced open and not a single coin was left behind´.  
 The end was narrated by Dunraven in an eloquent manner, full of oratorical pauses for the right effect. Unwin guessed that Dunraven had uttered this several times with the same efficiency and calm.   
´How did the lion and the slave die?´ Unwin asked, simulating interest.  
´Even their faces had been smashed´, the incorrigible voice replied with grim satisfaction.   
The sound of the rain added to the sound of their footsteps. Unwin wondered if they would have to sleep in the labyrinth, in the central chamber of the story. He thought that the great discomfort of the act would be an adventurous memory. He remained silent. Dunraven, not being able to hold back anymore, asked, ´Isn´t this story inexplicable? ´   
´I don´t know whether or not it is inexplicable. I just know it is a lie, ´ Unwin answered, almost as if thinking aloud.   
To this, Dunraven responded with swear words and called for a testimony from the rector´s son (Allaby was apparently dead by then) as also from the other residents of Pentreath. Unwin apologized for his statement. Time seemed to stretch in the shadows. The two feared having lost their way and were very tired, when a dim light suddenly illumined a few steps of a narrow stairway. They climbed it and reached a circular room in ruins. In it were two signs of the unfortunate king: one was a narrow window which overlooked the moors and the sea while the other was a trap door on the floor which opened over the curve of the staircase. The room resembled a prison cell in spite of being very spacious.  
 The two friends decided to spend the night at the labyrinth, not as urged by the rain as by the desire to live to remember and share the story of the labyrinth. The mathematician slept peacefully while the poet lay down pursuing some verses relentlessly which his head deemed abhorrent. The verses played in his mind:

*Faceless the sultry and overpowering lion,  
 Faceless the stricken slave, faceless the king.*

Unwin had believed that the story of the death of Al-Bokhari did not interest him. But he woke up convinced of the need to decipher the mystery. He was distracted and aloof that entire day, arranging and rearranging the puzzle in his head. Three or four days later, he finally turned to Dunraven in a London bar and said these, or similar words: ´In Cornwell, I told you the story you told me was a lie. The events were true, or at least could have been true. But being told the way you told them, they were in their manner of manifestation, lies. I will start with the greatest of all lies: the incredible labyrinth. A fugitive would not hide himself in a labyrinth. He would not construct a crimson labyrinth on high plains along a sea-coast which could be spotted from miles by sailors. It would not be necessary to construct a labyrinth in a world which is already one. For a person who truly wants to hide himself, London would be a safer place than a watchtower to which all ships sail. These wise ideas I now tell you occurred to me two nights ago while we heard it rain over the labyrinth and waited for a dream to come to us. I decided to let go of your absurdity and think of something sensible.’  
‘Like the theory of permutations and combinations, or of the fourth dimension of space,’ Dunraven observed.  
‘No,’ Unwin replied in all sincerity, ‘I thought of the Cretan labyrinth; the one which had for its center a man with the head of a bull.’  
Dunraven, well-versed in crime fiction, believed that the solution to a mystery is always inferior to the mystery. The mystery is a part of the supernatural and of the divine; the solution, of sleight of hand. He said, in an effort to postpone the inevitable, ‘A bull head on medals and sculptures has a minotaur. Dante pictured it with the head of a man and the body of a bull.’  
‘That version is also acceptable to me’, Unwin agreed. ‘What matters is the relation between the monstrous house and the monstrous dweller. The Minotaur[[9]](#footnote-9) justifies the existence of the labyrinth completely. None would agree on the significance of a threat received through a dream. Invoking of the image of the Minotaur (a fatal invocation in the case of a labyrinth), the problem was virtually resolved. However, I have to confess that I did not realize the ancient image was the key to resolving the mystery. For that, your account was necessary as it provided another symbol to me: a spider web,’ Unwin added.  
‘A spider web?’, Dunraven asked, perplexed.  
‘Yes. Nothing surprised me as much as the fact that the spider web (we all know the universal form of a spider web: the cobweb of Plato) had suggested the crime to the murderer (as there is a murderer). You will remember how Al-Bokhari dreamt of a web of serpents as he slept in the tomb, and found, upon waking, that the touch of a spider web had caused him to dream. Let’s go back to that night when Al-Bokhari dreamt of the web. The defeated king, the vizier and the slave fled towards the desert with the treasure. None of this is credible. The events seem to have occurred differently. That night, the valiant king slept, while Zaid, the cowardly, stayed up. To sleep is to distract oneself away from the universe, and this distraction is not easy for one who knows he is being sought after with swords drawn out. Zaid, therefore, leaned over the dreaming king. He thought of killing him, perhaps fiddled with a dagger, but he didn’t dare. He called after the slave. They together hid a part of the treasure in the tomb and fled to Suakin and then England. This was done not in an effort to hide from Al-Bokhari, but rather in order to draw him to the red bricked labyrinth (which they conveniently constructed on high plains along the sea) and kill him. Zaid knew that the ships would carry the fame of the foreigner, the slave and the lion to the ports of the province of Sudan. Sooner or later, Al-Bokhari would come to the labyrinth in their search. A trap would await him in the final passage of the maze. Al-Bokhari despised Zaid infinitely for the betrayal; he would not take any precautions in his impulsiveness. The long-awaited day finally arrived when Ibn-Hakkan landed in England, walked to the door of the labyrinth, found his way through the blinding corridors, and had probably walked up the first few steps when his vizier killed him, aiming a shot from the trapdoor. The slave would kill the lion while another shot would kill the slave. Then Zaid smashed all three faces with a stone. He had to work in this fashion. A single corpse with a smashed face would suggest a problem of identity, but the beast, the slave and the king created a series. This also explains why he was overcome with fear when he spoke with Allaby. He had completed the horrible task and was set to flee from England to reclaim the treasure.’  
 The air was thick with a thoughtful silence, or a sense of disbelief, at the end of Unwin’s words. Dunraven ordered another pitcher of beer before commenting on the speech. ‘I admit,’ he said, ‘that the Ibn-Hakkan we knew could actually have been Zaid. The metamorphoses such as you tell me are classic contrivances of the genre. They are true conventions which require a reader for observation. What I refuse to accept is that a part of the treasure was left behind in Sudan. Remember that Zaid fled from the king and the enemies of the king. In this case, it would make more sense if he robbed everything rather than leaving behind a part of the treasure. Perhaps, the reason why no money was found in the labyrinth is because there was no money left behind in it. The masons would have exhausted the treasure immediately as unlike the red gold of the Nibelungs[[10]](#footnote-10), the treasure was not infinite. It’s hard to picture Zaid crossing the sea in order to reclaim a dilapidated treasure.’  
 ‘Not dilapidated,’ Unwin intervened. ‘The treasure was invested in the construction of the large circular trap on the land of infidels in order to capture and annihilate Ibn-Hakkan. Zaid, if we go by your conjecture, was urged into action by hate and fear, and not by greed. He robbed the treasure and later realized that the treasure was not what he needed. What was essential was the death of Ibn-Hakkan. He pretended to be Ibn-Hakkan, and ultimately, *he was Ibn-Hakkan.*   
 ‘Yes,’ Dunraven agreed. ‘He was a vagabond who, instead of being a nobody in death, wanted to remember being a king in death or wanted to pretend being a king, someday.’

1. Fermat: Refers to the 17th century amateur mathematician Pierre de Fermat whose early developments lead to infinitesimal calculus. He is most known for *Fermat’s Last Theorem* which he had described as a note on the margin of a copy of Diophantus’ book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diophantus: An Alexandrian Greek mathematician who is sometimes known as ‘father of algebra’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibn Hakkan Al-Bokhari: The name Bokhari is also spelled as Bukhari and it is a common surname in Western and Central Asia. Al-Bokhari would translate closely as ‘from Bukhara’, Bukhara being a place in the now known land of Uzbekistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nilotic: Of the Nile region of Africa (around the River Nile). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Purloined Letter: A short detective story by the American author Edgar Allen Poe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Big Bow Mystery: A work of mystery written by Israel Zangwill, a British humorist and writer. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nicholas of Cusa: A 15th century German philosopher, theologian, jurist and astronomer. He also wrote on mathematical concepts such as ‘squaring the circle’ in his mathematical treatises. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pliny: Refers to Gaius Plinius Secundus, better known as Pliny the Elder who was a Roman author, naturalist, a natural philosopher, and a naval and military commander of the early Roman Empire. He wrote a series of books titled *Natural History.* In Book 8 of this collection, there is a fairly detailed description of dragons. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Minotaur: A Greek mythical creature with the head of a bull on the body of a man. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nibelungs: In Teutonic legend (c. 1200 A.D.), any of a race of dwarfs who possessed a treasure captured by Siegfried. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)