

THE CAMEL TRADER OF BABYLON

Based on the short story

TARKAD, a young man in rags, scavenges for food. He is pacing in front of an eating house when DABASIR, confident and affluent, finds him.

DABASIR

Ha! Tis Tarkad, just the one I have been seeking that he might repay the two pieces of copper which I lent him a moon ago; also the piece of silver which I lent to him before that. We are well met. I can make good use of the coins this very day. What say, boy? What say?

Tarkad is flushed.

TARKAD

I am sorry, very sorry, but this day I have neither the copper nor the silver which I could repay.

DABASIR

Then get it. Surely thou canst get a hold of a few coppers and a piece of silver to repay the generosity of an old friend of thy father who aided thee whenst thou was in need.

TARKAD

'Tis because ill fortune does pursue me that I cannot pay.

DABASIR

Ill fortune! Wouldst blame the gods for thine own weakness. Ill fortune pursues every man who think more of borrowing than of repaying. Come with me, boy, while I eat. I am hungry and would tell thee a tale.

Dabasir pushes him to a far corner of the room where they seat themselves upon small rugs. Dabasir signals the proprietor his order. He greets the other customers, all of whom know him.

DABASIR

I did hear from a traveler just returned from Urfa of a certain rich man who has a piece of stone so thin that one can look through it. He put it in the window of his house to keep out the rains. It is yellow, so this traveler does relate, and he was permitted to look through it and all the outside world looked strange and not like it really is. What say you to that Tarkad? Thinkest all the world could look to a man a different color from what it is?

The fat leg of a goat is placed before Dabasir. A cup of water before Tarkad. His heart sinks.

TARKAD

I dare say.

DABASIR

Well, I know it to be true for I myself have seen the world all of a different color from what it really is and the tale I am about to tell thee relates how I came to see it in it's right color once more.

NEIGHBOR

Dabasir will tell a tale!

Neighboring diners start whispering and crowding around with rugs and their food to hear the tale.

DABASIR

The tale I am about to tell, (pauses for a bite) relates to my early life and how I came to be a camel trader. Didst anyone know I once was a slave in Syria?

A murmur of surprise runs through the audience.

DABASIR (V.O.)

(He takes another bite)

When I was a young man I learned the trade of my father, the making of saddles. I worked with him in his shop and took to myself a wife.

Working in the saddle shop with his father YOUNG Dabasir smiles at a patron's daughter. SHE smiles back.

DABASIR (V.O.)

Being young and not greatly skilled, I could earn but little, just enough to support my excellent wife in a modest way. I craved good things which I could not afford. Soon I found that the shopkeepers would trust me to pay later even though I could not pay at the time

.

Dabasir and his wife decorate their humble home with beautiful rugs and cushions, tea sets and gardens.

DABASIR (V.O.)

Being young and without experience I did not know that he who spends more than he earns is sewing the winds of needless self indulgence from which he is sure to reap the whirlwinds of trouble and humiliation. So I indulged my whims for fine raiment and bought luxuries for my good wife and our home, beyond our means.

They wear fine clothes and have several to choose from. Wearing a beautiful shawl and with jewels covering her face she starts to worry over his spending.

DABASIR (V.O.)

I paid as I could and for a while all went well. But in time I discovered I could not use my earnings both to live upon and to pay my debts. Creditors began to pursue me to pay for my extravagant purchases and my life became miserable. I borrowed from my friends, but could not repay them either. My wife returned to her father and I decided to leave Babylon.

Dabasir is ALONE surrounded by luxurious stuff.

The wind blows over the dunes as a caravan crosses the desert.

DABASIR (V.O.)

For two years I had a restless and unsuccessful life working for caravan traders. From this I fell in with a set of likable robbers who scoured the desert for unarmed caravans. Such deeds were unworthy of the son of my father, but I was seeing the world through a colored stone and did not realize to what degradation I had fallen.

Dabasir and the THIEVES wait behind a dune as a caravan approaches. They ATTACK.

DABASIR (V.O.)

We met with success on our first trip.

Just after the thieves make a capture, a rich haul of gold and silks and valuable merchandise, they are attacked by spearmen.

DABASIR (V.O.)

The second time we were not so fortunate.

Their two leaders are killed and the rest are taken for slaves to Damascus.

Dabasir, hair shorn with but a loincloth, is surrounded by other slaves of similar appearance in the slave market. He is purchased by a Syrian Desert CHIEF.

DABASIR (V.O.)

Being a reckless youth I thought it merely an adventure.

The men of the tribe are fierce and warlike. He is brought to their tents where he is held down for CASTRATION. Dabasir REALIZES the hopelessness of his situation.

The chief's wives approach. After a long moment of waiting SIRA, the oldest, speaks up. They pause the castration.

SIRA

Of eunuchs we have plenty, but of camel tenders we have few and they are a worthless lot.

(MORE)

SIRA (CONT'D)

Even this day I would visit my mother who is sick with the fever and there is no slave I would trust to lead my camel. Ask this slave if he can lead a camel.

DESERT CHIEFTAIN

(to Dabasir)

What know you of camels?

DABASIR

I can make them kneel, I can load them, I can lead them on long trips without tiring. If need be, I can repair their trappings.

DESERT CHIEF

The slave speaks forward enough. If thou so desire, Sira, take this man for thy camel tender.

5

EXT. DESERT - DAY

5

Dabasir leads Sira's camel across the desert.

DABASIR (V.O.)

So I was turned over to Sira and that day I led her camel upon a long journey to her sick mother. I took the occasion to thank her for her intercession and to explain that I was not a slave by birth.

SIRA

How can you call yourself a freeman when your weakness has brought you to this? If a man has in himself the soul of a slave will he not become one no matter what his birth, even as water seeks its level? If a man has within him the soul of a free man, will he not become respected and honored in his own city in spite of his misfortune?

6

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

6

On a dune overlooking the slave camp Dabasir ponders Sira's words. She approaches him.

SIRA

In the eventime when the other  
slaves can mingle and enjoy the  
society of each other, why dost  
thou sit in thy tent alone?

DABASIR

I am pondering what you have said  
to me. I wonder if I have the soul  
of a slave. I cannot join them, so  
I must sit apart.

SIRA

I, too, must sit apart. My dowry  
was large and my lord married me  
because of it. Yet he does not  
desire me. What every woman longs  
for is to be desired. Because of  
this and because I am barren and  
have neither son or daughter, must  
I sit apart. Where I a man I would  
rather die than be such a slave,  
but the conventions of our tribe  
make slaves of women.

DABASIR

What think thou of me by this time?  
Have I the soul of a Man or have I  
the soul of a slave.

SIRA

Have you a desire to repay the just  
debts you owe in Babylon?

DABASIR

Yes, I have the desire, but I see  
no way.

SIRA

If thou contentedly let the years  
slip by and make no effort to  
repay, then thou hast but the  
contemptible soul of a slave. No  
man is otherwise who cannot respect  
himself and no man can respect  
himself who does not repay honest  
debts.

DABASIR

But what can I do who am a slave in  
Syria.

SIRA  
Stay a slave in Syria, thou  
weakling.

DABASIR  
I am not a weakling.

SIRA  
Then prove it

DABASIR  
How?

SIRA  
Does not thy great king fight his  
enemies in every way he can and  
with every force he has? Thy debts  
are thy enemies. They ran thee out  
of Babylon. You left them alone and  
they grew too strong for thee.  
Hadst fought them as a man, thou  
couldst have conquered them and  
been one honored among the  
townspeople. But thou had not the  
soul to fight them and behold thy  
pride hast gone down until thou are  
a slave in Syria.

Dabasir has nothing to say. They sit silently and watch the  
fire from afar.

7 EXT. TRIBE CAMP - DAY

7

Dabasir is summoned to Sira.

SIRA  
My mother is again very sick.  
Saddle the two best camels in my  
husband's herd. Tie on waterskins  
and saddlebags for a long journey.  
The maid will give thee food at the  
kitchen tent.

Dabasir collects the food from the MAID, wondering at the  
large quantity of provisions for such a short journey. They  
set off across the desert.

8 EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

8

They arrive at Sira's mothers house. The maid is dismissed.



SIRA

Dabasir, hast thou the soul of a  
free man or the soul of a slave?

DABASIR

The soul of a free man.

SIRA

Now is thy chance to prove it. Thy  
master hath imbibed deeply and his  
chiefs are in a stupor. Take then  
these camels and make thy escape.  
Here in this bag is raiment of thy  
master's to disguise thee. I will  
say thou stole the camels and ran  
away while I visited my sick  
mother.

DABASIR

Thou hast the soul of a queen. Much  
do I wish that I might lead thee to  
happiness.

SIRA

Happiness awaits not the runaway  
wife who seeks it in far lands  
among strange people. Go thy own  
way and may the gods of the desert  
protect thee for the way is far and  
barren of food or water.

Dabasir sets off across the desert.

9 EXT. DESERT - DAY

9

Day after day they plod along. The SUN is merciless. Food and  
water has given out. Dabasir slides off the camel and falls  
to the ground, feeling his death.

10 EXT. DESERT - MORNING

10

Dabasir awakens at the first gleam of daylight.

CAMEL 1

A fitting end for a runaway slave

CAMEL 2

Thy debts are thy enemy

CAMEL 1

What can I do who am but a slave

## CAMEL 2

Hast thou the soul of a slave or  
the soul of a free man

His skin is burnt, lips bleeding, tongue swollen but his mind is clear. It is quiet except for the sounds of the desert. Dabasir hears the soul of the world and has an EPIPHANY. He finds within him the soul of a free man. In agony he staggers to his feet.

## DABASIR

(in a whisper to camels)  
What matters hunger, what matters  
thirst? They are but incidents on  
the road to Babylon.

The camels brighten at his new energy. With great effort they gain their feet. With pitiful perseverance they push on.

11 EXT. DESERT - AFTERNOON 11

In fertile country, with water, grass, fruit, the walls of Babylon appear on the horizon.

12 INT. EATING HOUSE - DAY 12

All is silent for a moment.

## DABASIR

How about thee Tarkad? Dost thy  
empty stomach make thy head  
exceedingly clear? Art ready to  
take the road that leads back to  
self respect? Canst thou see the  
world in its true color? Hast thou  
the desire to pay thy honest debts,  
however many they may be, and once  
again be a man respected in  
Babylon?

13 EXT. CAMEL AREA - DAY 13

Dabasir tends to camels.

## ONSCREEN

Where the determination is, the way  
can be found.