

The Tent of the Arabs

By Lord Dunsany

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The Tent of the Arabs

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE
THE KING
BEL-NARB, camel-driver
AOOB, camel-driver
THE CHAMBERLAIN
ZABRA, a notable
EZNARZA, a gypsy of the desert

SCENE:—Outside the gate of the city of Thalanna.
TIME:— Uncertain.

The Tent of the Arabs

ACT 1.

Bel-Narb

By evening we shall be in the desert again.

Aoob

Yes.

Bel-Narb

Then no more city for us for many weeks.

Aoob

Ah!

Bel-Narb

We shall see the lights come out, looking back from the camel-track; that is the last we shall see of it.

Aoob

We shall be in the desert then.

Bel-Narb

The old angry desert.

Aoob

How cunningly the desert hides his wells. You would say he had an enmity with man. He does not welcome you as the cities do.

Bel-Narb

He has an enmity. I hate the desert.

Aoob

I think there is nothing in the world so beautiful as cities.

Bel-Narb

Cities are beautiful things.

Aoob

I think they are loveliest a little after dawn when night falls off from the houses. They draw it away from them slowly and let it fall like a cloak and stand quite naked in their beauty to shine in some broad river; and the light comes up and kisses them on the forehead. I think they are loveliest then. The voices of men and women begin to arise in the streets, scarce audible, one by one, till a slow loud murmur arises and all the voices are one. I often think the city speaks to me then: she says in that voice of hers, "Aoob, Aoob, who one of these days shall die, I am not earthly, I have been always, I shall not die."

Bel-Narb

I do not think that cities are loveliest at dawn. We can see dawn in the desert any day. I think they are loveliest just when the sun is set and a dusk steals along the narrower streets, a dusk that is not of the night yet not of the day, a kind of mystery in which we can see cloaked figures and yet not quite discern whose figures they be. And just when it would be dark, and out in the desert there would be nothing to see but a black horizon and a black sky on top of it, just then the swinging lanterns are lighted up and lights come out in windows one by one and all the colours of the rainments change. Then a woman perhaps will slip from a little door and go away up the street into the night, and a man perhaps will steal by with a dagger for some old quarrel's sake, and Skarmi will light up his house to sell brandy all night long, and men will sit on benches outside his door playing skabash by the glare of a small green lantern, while they light great bubbling pipes and smoke nargroob. O, it is all very good to watch. And I like to think as I smoke and see these things that somewhere, far away, the desert has put up a huge red cloud like a wing so that all the Arabs know that next day the Siroc will blow, the accursed breath of Eblis the father of Satan.

Aoob

Yes, it is pleasant to think of the Siroc when one is safe in a city, but I do not like to think about it now, for before the day is out we will be taking pilgrims to Mecca, and who ever prophesied of knew by wit what the desert had in store? Going into the desert is like throwing bone after bone to a dog, some he will catch and some he will drop. He may catch our bones, or we may go by and come to gleaming Mecca. O-ho, I would I were a merchant

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with a little booth in a frequented street to sit all day and barter.

Bel–Narb

Aye, it is easier to cheat some lord coming to buy silk and ornaments in a city than to cheat death in the desert.

Oh, the desert, the desert, I love the beautiful cities and I hate the desert.

Aoob

[pointing off L.]

Who is that?

Bel–Narb

What? There by the desert's edge where the camels are?

Aoob

Yes, who is it?

Bel–Narb

He is staring across the desert the way that the camels go. They say that the King goes down to the edge of the desert and often stares across it. He stands there for a long time of an evening looking towards Mecca.

Aoob

Of what use is it to the King to look towards Mecca? He cannot go to Mecca. He cannot go into the desert for one day. Messengers would run after him and cry his name and bring him back to the council–hall or to the chamber of judgements. If they could not find him their heads would be struck off and put high up upon some windy roof: the judges would point at them and say, "They see better there!"

Bel–Narb

No, the King cannot go away into the desert. If God were to make me King I would go down to the edge of the desert once, and I would shake the sand out of my turban and out of my beard and then I would never look at the desert again. Greedy and parched old parent of thousands of devils! He might cover the wells with sand, and blow with his Siroc, year after year and century after century, and never earn one of my curses—if God made me King.

Aoob

They say you are like the King.

Bel–Narb

Yes, I am like the King. Because his father disguised himself as a camel–driver and came through our villages. I often say to myself, "God is just. And if I could disguise myself as the King and drive him out to be a camel–driver, that would please God for He is just."

Aoob

If you did this God would say, "Look at Bel–Narb, whom I made to be a camel–driver and who has forgotten this." And then he would forget you, Bel–Narb.

Bel–Narb

Who knows what God would say?

Aoob

Who knows? His ways are wonderful.

Bel–Narb

I would not do this thing, Aoob. I would not do it. It is only what I say to myself as I smoke, or at night out in the desert. I say to myself, "Bel–Narb is King in Thalanna." And then I say, "Chamberlain, bring Skarmi here with his brandy and his lanterns and boards to play skabash, and let all the town come and drink before the palace and magnify my name."

Pilgrims

[Calling, off.]

Bel–Narb! Bel–Narb! Child of two dogs. Come and untether your camels. Come and start for holy Mecca.

Bel–Narb

A curse on the desert.

Aoob

The camels are rising. The caravan starts for Mecca. Farewell, beautiful city.

[Pilgrims' voices off: "Bel–Narb! "Bel–Narb!"]

Bel–Narb

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I come, children of sin.

[Exeunt Bel–Narb and Aoob.]

[The King enters through the great door crowned. He sits upon the step.]

King

A crown should not be worn upon the head. A sceptre should not be carried in Kings' hands. But a crown should be wrought into a golden chain, and a sceptre driven stake–wise into the ground so that a King may be chained to it by the ankle. Then he would know that he might not stray away into the beautiful desert and might never see the palm trees by the well. O Thalanna, Thalanna, how I hate this city with its narrow, narrow ways, and evening after evening drunken men playing skabash in the scandalous gambling house of that old scoundrel Skarmi. O that I might marry the child of some unkingly house that generation to generation had never known a city, and that we might ride from here down the long track through the desert, always we two alone till we came to the tents of the Arabs. And the crown–some foolish, greedy man should be given to its sorrow. And all this may not be, for a King is yet a King.

[Enter Chamberlain through door.]

Chamberlain

Your Majesty!

King

Well, my lord Chamberlain, have you more work for me to do?

Chamberlain

Yes, there is much to do.

King

I had hoped for freedom for this evening, for the faces of the camels are towards Mecca, and I would see the caravans move off into the desert where I may not go.

Chamberlain

There is very much for your Majesty to do. Iktra has revolted.

King

Where is Iktra?

Chamberlain

It is a little country tributary to your Majesty beyond Zebdarlon, up among the hills.

King

Almost, had it not been for this, almost I had asked you to let me go away among the camel–drivers to golden Mecca. I have done this work of a King now for five years and listened to my councillors, and all the while the desert called to me; he said, "Come to the tents of my children, to the tents of my children!" And all the while I dwelt among these walls.

Chamberlain

If your Majesty left the city now——

King

I will not, we must raise an army to punish the men of Iktra.

Chamberlain

Your Majesty will appoint the commanders by name. A tribe of your Majesty's fighting men must be summoned from Agrarva and another from Coloono, the jungle city, as well as one from Mirsk. This must be done by warrants sealed by your hand. Your Majesty's advisors await you in the council–hall.

King

The sun is very low. Why have the caravans not started yet?

Chamberlain

I do not know. And then your Majesty——

King

[Laying his hand on the Chamberlain's arm.]

Look, look! It is the shadows of the camels moving towards Mecca. How silently they slip over the ground, beautiful shadows. Soon they are out in the desert flat on the golden sands. And then the sun will set and they will be one with night.

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Chamberlain

If your Majesty has time for such things there are the camels themselves.

King

No, no I do not wish to watch the camels. They can never take me out to the beautiful desert to be free forever from cities. Here I must stay to do the work of a King. Only my dreams can go, and the shadows of the camels carry them, to find peace by the tents of the Arabs.

Chamberlain

Will your Majesty now come to the council-hall?

King

Yes, yes, I come.

[Voices off: "Ho Yo! Ho Yay! Ho Yo. Ho Yay!"]

Now the whole caravan has started. Hark to the drivers of the baggage-camels. They will run behind them for the first ten miles, and to-morrow they will mount them. They will be out of sight of Thalanna then, and the desert will lie all round them with sunlight falling on its golden smiles. And a new look will come into their faces. I am sure that the desert whispers to them by night saying, "Be at peace, my children, at peace, my children."

[Meanwhile the Chamberlain has opened the door for the King and is waiting there bowing, with his hand resolutely on the opened door.]

Chamberlain

Your Majesty will come to the council-hall?

King

Yes, I will come. Had it not been for Iktra I might have gone away and lived in the golden desert for a year, and seen holy Mecca.

Chamberlain

Perhaps your Majesty might have gone had it not been for Iktra.

King

My curse upon Iktra!

[He goes through the doorway.]

[As they stand in doorway enter Zabra R.]

ZABRA

Your Majesty.

King

O-ho. More work for an unhappy King.

ZABRA

Iktra is pacified.

King

Is pacified?

ZABRA

It happened suddenly. The men of Iktra met with a few of your Majesty's fighting men and an arrow chanced to kill the leader of the revolt, and therefore the mob fled away although they were many, and they have all cried for three hours, "Great is the King!"

King

I will even yet see Mecca and the dreamed-of tents of the Arabs. I will go down now into the golden sands, I

Chamberlain

Your Majesty---

King

In a few years I will return to you.

Chamberlain

Your Majesty, it cannot be. We could not govern the people for more than a year. They would say, "The King is dead, the king---"

King

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Then I will return in a year. In one year only.

Chamberlain

It is a long time, your Majesty.

King

I will return at noon a year from to-day.

Chamberlain

But, your Majesty, a princess is being sent for from Tharba.

King

I thought one was coming from Karshish.

Chamberlain

It has been thought more advisable that your Majesty should wed in Tharba. The passes across the mountains belong to the King of Tharba and he has great traffic with Sharan and the Isles.

King

Let it be as you will.

Chamberlain

But, your Majesty, the ambassadors start this week; the princess will be here in three months' time.

King

let her come in a year and a day.

Chamberlain

Your Majesty!

King

Farewell, I am in haste. I go to make ready for the desert [exit through door still speaking], the olden, golden mother of happy men.

Chamberlain

[To Zabra.]

One from whom God had not withheld all wisdom would not have given that message to our crazy young King.

ZABRA

But it must be known. Many things might happen if it were not known at once.

Chamberlain

I knew it this morning. He is off to the desert now.

ZABRA

That is evil indeed; but we can lure him back.

Chamberlain

Perhaps not for many days.

ZABRA

The King's favour is like gold.

Chamberlain

It is much like gold. Who are the Arabs that the King's favour should be cast among them? The walls of their houses are canvas. Even the common snail has a finer wall to his house.

ZABRA

O, it is most evil. Alas that I told him this. We shall be poor men.

Chamberlain

No one will give us gold for many days.

ZABRA

Yet you will govern Thalanna while he is away. You can increase the taxes of the merchants and the tribute of the men that till the fields.

Chamberlain

They will only pay taxes and tribute to the King, who gives of his bounty to just and upright men when he is in Thalanna. But while he is away the surfeit of his wealth will go to unjust men and to men whose beards are unclean and who fear not God.

ZABRA

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We shall indeed be poor.

Chamberlain

A little gold perhaps from evil-doers for justice. Or a little money to decide the dispute of some righteous wealthy man; but no more till the King returns, whom God prosper.

ZABRA

God increase him. Will you yet try to detain him?

Chamberlain

No. When he comes by with his retinue and escort I will walk beside his horse and tell him that a progress through the desert will well impress the Arabs with his splendour and turn their hearts towards him. And I will speak privily to some captain at the rear of the escort and he shall afterwards speak to the chief commander that he may lose the camel-track in a few days' time and take the King and his followers to wander in the desert and so return by chance to Thalanna again. And it may yet be well with us. We will wait here till they come by.

ZABRA

Will the chief commander do this thing certainly?

Chamberlain

Yes, he will be one Thakbar, a poor man and a righteous.

ZABRA

But if he be not Thakbar but some greedy man who demands more gold than we would give to Thakbar?

Chamberlain

Why, then we must give him even what he demands, and God will punish his greed.

ZABRA

He must come past us here.

Chamberlain

Yes, he must come this way. He will summon the cavalry from the Saloia Samang.

ZABRA

It will be nearly dark before they can come.

Chamberlain

No, he is in great haste. He will pass before sunset. He will make them mount at once.

ZABRA

[Looking off R.]

I do not see any stir at the Saloia.

Chamberlain

[Looking too.]

No——No. I do not see. He will make a stir.

[As they look a man comes through the doorway wearing a coarse brown cloak which falls over his forehead. He exits furtively L.]

What man is that? He has gone down to the camels.

ZABRA

He has given a piece of money to one of the camel-drivers.

Chamberlain

See, he has mounted.

ZABRA

Can it have been the King!

[Voices off L. "Ho-Yo! Ho-Yay!"]

Chamberlain

It is only some camel-driver going into the desert. How glad his voice sounds.

ZABRA

The Siroc will swallow him.

Chamberlain

What—if it were the King!

ZABRA

ACT 1.

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Why, if it were the King we should starve for a year.

CURTAIN.

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ACT 2.

The same scene

One year has elapsed.

[The King, wrapped in a camel-driver's cloak, sits by Eznarza, a gypsy of the desert.]

King

Now I have known the desert and dwelt in the tents of the Arabs.

Eznarza

There is no land like the desert and like the Arabs no people.

King

It is all over and done; I return to the walls of my fathers.

Eznarza

Time cannot put it away; I go back to the desert that nursed me.

King

Did you think in those days on the sands, or among the tents in the mornings, that my year would ever end, and I be brought away by strength of my word to the prisoning of a palace?

Eznarza

I knew that Time would do it, for my people have learned the way of him.

King

Is it then Time that has mocked our futile prayers? Is he greater than God that he has laughed at our praying?

Eznarza

We may not say that he is greater than God. Yet we prayed that our own year might not pass away. God could not save it.

King

Yes, yes. We prayed that prayer. All men would laugh at it.

Eznarza

The prayer was not laughable. Only he that is lord of the years is obdurate. If a man prayed for life to a furious, merciless Sultan well might the Sultan's slaves laugh. Yet it is not laughable to pray for life.

King

Yes, we are slaves of Time. To-morrow brings the princess who comes from Tharba. We must bow our heads.

Eznarza

My people say that Time lives in the desert. He lies there in the sun.

King

No, no, not in the desert. Nothing alters there.

Eznarza

My people say that the desert is his country. He smites not his own country, my people say. But he overwhelms all other lands of the world.

King

Yes, the desert is always the same, ev'n the littlest rocks of it.

Eznarza

They say that he loves the Sphinx and does not harm her. They say that he does not dare to harm the Sphinx. She has borne him many gods whom the infidels worship.

King

Their father is more terrible than all the false gods.

Eznarza

O, that he had but spared our little year.

King

He destroys all things utterly.

Eznarza

There is a little child of man that is mightier than he, and who saves the world from Time.

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King

Who is this little child that is mightier than Time? Is it Love that is mightier?

Eznarza

No, not Love.

King

If he conquer even Love then none are mightier.

Eznarza

He scares Love away with weak white hairs and with wrinkles. Poor little love, poor Love, Time scares him away.

King

What is this child of man that can conquer Time and that is braver than Love?

Eznarza

Even memory.

King

Yes. I will call to him when the wind is from the desert and the locusts are beaten against my obdurate walls. I will call to him more when I cannot see the desert and cannot hear the wind of it.

Eznarza

He shall bring back our year to us that Time cannot destroy. Time cannot slaughter it if Memory says no. It is reprieved, though banished. We shall often see it though a little far off and all its hours and days shall dance to us and go by one by one and come back and dance again.

King

Why, it is true. They shall come back to us. I had thought that they that work miracles whether in Heaven or Earth were unable to do one thing. I thought that they could not bring back days again when once they had fallen into the hands of Time.

Eznarza

It is a trick that Memory can do. He comes up softly in the town or the desert, wherever a few men are, like the strange dark conjurors who sing to snakes, and he does his trick before them, and does it again and again.

King

We will often make him bring the old days back when you are gone to your people and I am miserably wedded to the princess coming from Tharba.

Eznarza

They will come with sand on their feet from the golden, beautiful desert, they will come with a long-gone sunset each one over his head. Their lips will laugh with the olden evening voices.

King

It is nearly noon. It is nearly noon. It is nearly noon.

Eznarza

Why, we part then.

King

O, come into the city and be Queen there. I will send its princess back again to Tharba. You shall be Queen in Thalanna.

Eznarza

I go now back to my people. You will wed the princess from Tharba on the morrow. You have said it. I have said it.

King

O, that I had not given my word to return.

Eznarza

A King's word is like a King's crown and a King's sceptre and a King's throne. It is in fact a foolish thing, like a city.

King

I cannot break my word. But you can be queen in Thalanna.

Eznarza

Thalanna will not have a gypsy for a queen.

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King

I will make Thalanna have her for a queen.

Eznarza

You cannot make a gypsy live for a year in a city.

King

I knew of a gypsy that lived once in a city.

Eznarza

Not such a gypsy as I...come back to the tents of the Arabs.

King

I cannot. I gave my word.

Eznarza

Kings have broken their words.

King

Not such a King as I.

Eznarza

We have only that little child of man whose name is Memory.

King

Come. He shall bring back to us, before we part, one of those days that were banished.

Eznarza

Let it be the first day. The day we met by the well when the camels came to El-Lolith.

King

Our year lacked some few days. For my year began here. The camels were some days out.

Eznarza

You were riding a little wide of the caravan, upon the side of the sunset. Your camel was swinging on with easy strides. But you were tired.

King

You had come to the well for water. At first I could see your eyes, then the stars came out, and it grew dark and I only saw your shape, and there was a little light about your hair: I do not know if it was the light of the stars, I only knew that it shone.

Eznarza

And then you spoke to me about the camels.

King

Then I heard your voice. You did not say the things you would say now.

Eznarza

Of course I did not.

King

You did not say things in the same way even.

Eznarza

How the hours come dancing back.

King

No, no. Only their shadows. We went together then to holy Mecca. We dwelt alone in tents in the golden desert. We heard the wild free day sing songs in his freedom, we heard the beautiful night-wind. Nothing remains of our year but desolate shadows. Memory whips them and they will not dance.

[Eznarza does not answer.]

We made our farewells where the desert was. The city shall not hear them.

[Eznarza covers her face. The King rises softly and walks up the steps. Enter L. the Chamberlain and Zabra, only noticing each other.]

Chamberlain

He will come. He will come.

ZABRA

But it is noon now. Our fatness has left us. Our enemies mock at us. If he do not come God has forgotten us and

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our friends will pity us!

Chamberlain

If he is alive he will come.

[Enter Bel-Narb and Aoob.]

ZABRA

I fear that it is past noon.

Chamberlain

Then he is dead or robbers have waylaid him.

[Chamberlain and Zabra put dust on their heads.]

Bel-Narb

[To Aoob.]

God is just!

[To Chamberlain and Zabra.]

I am the King!

[The King's hand is on the door. When Bel-Narb says this he goes down the steps again and sits beside the gypsy. She raises her head from her hands and looks at him fixedly. He partially covers his face Arab fashion and watches Bel-Narb and the Chamberlain and Zabra.]

Chamberlain

Are you indeed the King?

Bel-Narb

I am the King.

Chamberlain

Your Majesty has altered much since a year ago.

Bel-Narb

Men alter in the desert. And alter much.

Aoob

Indeed, your Excellency, he is the King. When the King went into the desert disguised I fed his camel. Indeed he is the King.

ZABRA

He is the King. I know the King when I see him.

Chamberlain

You have seen the King seldom.

ZABRA

I have often seen the King.

Bel-Narb

Yes, we have often met, often and often.

Chamberlain

If some one could recognize your Majesty, some one besides this man who came with you, then we should all be certain.

Bel-Narb

There is no need of it. I am the King.

[The King rises and stretches out his hand palm downwards.]

King

In holy Mecca, in green-roofed Mecca of the many gates, we knew him for the King.

Bel-Narb

Yes, that is true. I saw this man in Mecca.

Chamberlain

[Bowing low.]

Pardon, your Majesty. The desert had altered you.

ZABRA

I knew your Majesty.

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Aoob

As well as I do.

Bel–Narb

[Pointing to the King.]

Let this man be rewarded suitably. Give him some post in the palace.

Chamberlain

Yes, your Majesty.

King

I am a camel–driver and we go back to our camels.

Chamberlain

As you wish.

[Exeunt Bel–Narb, Aoob, Chamberlain and Zabra through door.]

Eznarza

You have done wisely, wisely, and the reward for wisdom is happiness.

King

They have their king now. But we will turn again to the tents of the Arabs.

Eznarza

They are foolish people.

King

They have found a foolish king.

Eznarza

It is a foolish man that would choose to dwell among walls.

King

Some are born kings, but this man has chosen to be one.

Eznarza

Come, let us leave them.

King

We will go back again.

Eznarza

Come back to the tents of my people.

King

We will dwell a little apart in a dear brown tent of our own.

Eznarza

We shall hear the sand again, whispering low to the dawn–wind.

King

We shall hear the nomads stirring in their camps far off because it is dawn.

Eznarza

The jackals will patter past us slipping back to the hills.

King

When at evening the sun is set we shall weep for no day that is gone.

Eznarza

I will raise up my head of a night–time against the sky, and the old, old unbought stars shall twinkle through my hair, and we shall not envy any of the diademmed queens of the world.

Curtain.