

## The Three Wise Shaikhs

Three young men named Tariq, Nabeel and Eissa sat silently round a fire in the desert. The rest of the family had already retired to the tents and now at last the silence was broken only occasionally by the snorting of a camel, a crackle from the fire or a remark from one of them which issued forth as it were from a deep reverie. It was deliciously cool after the heat of the day. The sky opened up above them in all its infinitude, countless stars twinkling from every direction of that vast orb.

But there was one star which had now caught their attention. It was slowly moving in a north-westerly direction and it did not twinkle. It could not be a plane because it did not have flashing lights. An hour later, just as the last embers of the fire flared up and then died, it disappeared behind a sand-dune. The next night it was there again, and this time Tariq, Nabeel and Eissa began to reflect on the possible meaning of this portent. Nabeel seemed to remember that he had read somewhere that the birth of the *Mahdi al-Muntatha*, the awaited messiah, would be indicated by a moving star. Why did they not follow it and thereby become the first to welcome this most important of all children into the world?

The next day they had to return to their palaces in the city and resume their business activities. But each night they looked up at the sky, and there was that star beckoning to them again. Each of them knew that their fathers would never agree to the adventure which they were already planning. They played essential parts in their family enterprises, Eissa's parents were negotiating his marriage, Tariq was expected to tutor his younger brother and so on. It became clear that the only place from which they could escape was the desert, to which they retreated most weekends.

Shortly thereafter the three men, who had purposely parked their Toyota four-wheel drive at some distance from the tents, stole away into the night. They needed to get across the border before daylight broke and their parents found their notes indicating that they had gone. They planned to take a bearing on the star every night, mark this as a straight line on the map, and then drive as far as possible in the same direction. In this way they passed through Arabia and into the Levant. They half expected that they would be led to Palestine, but the bearing did not indicate this, and they passed instead into Turkey, over the Bosphorus Bridge and into Europe. As they moved north they sometimes found that they had to wait several days in the same place because the sky was obscured by cloud and they could not see their star, but at last they came to France and the English Channel. The bearing now indicated that they should aim for a town called Brighton in England, and so they took the ferry from Dieppe to Newhaven and arrived on 24 December in this seaside resort town. There was a thick fog and no chance of seeing the star that night.

They parked the Toyota at the Grand, but were informed that it was fully booked. It was the same story at the Metropole; many people had come from London to celebrate Christmas in Brighton. They were cold and tired and didn't mind much where they went as long as they found beds for the night. The Bethlehem Hotel didn't look up to much, but it would serve for one night. There were certainly no suites here, and so they took a large room together and finally persuaded the rather surly receptionist, after a liberal application of bakhshesh, to provide them with three beds. As they made their way to their room without the customary assistance, they passed various men and women of assorted ages the like of whom they had never seen

before, not even in India. They looked dirty and dishevelled, their clothes were old and worn out, and some of them looked dangerous. A number asked them for money and couldn't believe their luck when they got ten pound notes in response.

Once inside their room an argument broke out between them as to who was responsible for the predicament they found themselves in. They debated leaving again, but it was too late and they were too tired. So they settled themselves for the night while asking themselves and each other how it could be that such poor people could afford hotel rooms.

Suddenly there was a scream. None of them had been sleeping well, and so they were all awake in an instant. It was two o'clock. They waited in horror. Then it came again, louder this time, and clearly from the next room. It was a woman's voice. Had it been a man they would have been in no doubt about rushing to his assistance, even in such an unsavoury environment. But what could they do about a woman? Perhaps her husband was beating her; in that case they certainly could not intervene. If she were alone, it would be unseemly for a strange man to go to her aid, except in extremis. The next scream announced that it *was* extremis. They all collided at the door and plunged into the corridor. Other doors were opening along the passage and ghostly figures emerged.

"Mary's 'aving a babby. We'd best get a doc quick" called out a six-foot man with long hair who was wearing a shirt and underpants and appeared to have no worries about being the first to arrive in Mary's room. "Give us 10p for the phone, mate."

"Here. You can use my mobile" said Tariq, going back into their room to fetch it. (In the confusion of the moment he forgot to ask for it back and never saw it again.)

By this time the three friends were standing at the front of a sizeable crowd, and had little option but to watch what ensued. A middle-aged woman with only a few blackened teeth left in her mouth was sitting beside Mary and talking to her in a strange nasal dialect.

"It's alright now. The doctor's coming. You're doing fine. Now breathe deeply. Steady does it. That's great." To which Mary was gasping between screams: "I can't. I'm going to die. God save me."

By the time the ambulance crew arrived (this is who the emergency services had sent) the baby was already emerging, and a minute later, with a rush it had started its independent existence with a cry of disapproval. Someone cried out, "It's a boy". Nabil and Eissa both passed out, and one of the ambulance men had to turn his attention to them. Tariq was extremely shaken but survived on his feet.

It did not take long for all of them to reflect upon the fact that they had set out to witness a birth and now, in the most unlikely of circumstances, they had done so. Could this really be the messiah. What would the star tell them now? To know that they might have to wait a long time. They learnt that cloudy weather and rain was expected for the next week or more. Mary was taken to hospital with her child where they visited her. Eissa brought the child a gold bracelet which he found in the Lanes,

and Tariq and Nabeel brought some frankincense and myrrh which they had purchased in the souq back home and which they said would make Mary's room smell nicer. Mary particularly liked Eissa, in fact she said she fancied him, and had decided to call her baby after him. She couldn't pronounce it, but Eissa sounded alright.

On Friday Tariq, Nabeel and Eissa senior went to the mosque to pray and met the Imam of Brighton and Hove. They told him their story, with some embarrassment, because they knew that what they had done was not orthodox and had been undertaken more for the adventure than for anything. The Imam showed a particular interest, however, in the star which they said they had been following. What did it look like, how fast did it travel across the sky, what was its bearing exactly etc.? He said nothing about his thoughts, but invited them to stay with him in his house. The next day he announced that the star which had steered them to Brighton was a recently launched telecommunications satellite; had they continued to follow it, they would have circumvented the globe, though not in the Toyota. They had to laugh.

The story has several sequels. The first is that the press got hold of the story and had a field-day. The papers were full of cartoons of oriental potentates arriving in Brighton on camelback and finding the infant Eissa and his mother in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. There were headlines such as "Oh little star of Brighthelmstone", "The Three Foolish Shaikhs", "Twinkle, Twinkel, Little Communications Satellite" and "We Three Shaikhs of Orient Are" appearing above articles ridiculing, or at least having a lot of fun at the expense of the three young Arabs. Secondly, having learnt the truth about Mary and many others like her, the three friends agreed, after a great deal of argument in which Mary's immorality and the fact that she was nominally a Christian weighed heavily but finally not decisively, that they would fund a project set up by the Imam and others to house the poor of Brighton in dignified conditions, whatever their religious affiliation or lack of it, and in particular to ensure that the cycle of deprivation did not continue into the next generation. Thirdly, and largely as a consequence of the second sequel, Eissa junior grew up to be a charismatic world leader who called for a true recognition of our common humanity, for the rooting out of conscious and unconscious prejudice and for the establishment thereby of peace on earth.

The last sequel is rather sad for it shows how badly needed Eissa's message is. Some years later the country of which our friends had now become rulers found itself in dispute with the United States, and Britain, as usual, backed their transatlantic ally. An objective consideration of the matter led one inevitably to the conclusion that the US was wrong, but objectivity was at a premium in a situation where self-interest was paramount. The press was full of self-righteous posturing. We were reminded of an incident some years earlier when three crazy Arabs had come by camel to Britain in the hope of finding the Mahdi here; it was even rumoured that these same men were now in the ruling echelons of this very same country which was behaving so unreasonably. What more evidence could there be of their immaturity, what better proof that we, the West, understood their interests better than they themselves. So went the argument, and because public opinion was willing to be convinced, and because the US was more powerful militarily, the West won the day.

Note: Eissa is the Arabic form of the name Jesus.