

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 4

East is east and west is west ...

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

... and making the twain meet can be a dolorous business.

A large part of the past month has been taken up, as I mentioned at the end of my last letter, with an experiment in fusing two consciousnesses or, to put it more simply, seeing what would happen if you were to tell an eastern story to a western audience.

For this I went to a source I had long been interested in exploring further (I did some work on it myself earlier this year) - a story out of the Arabian Nights, which is also found in collections of Sufi teaching legends and was performed along the caravanserai routes in tea houses for centuries. I stirred in other stories, or fragments of stories, from both Jewish and Islamic sources.

You might be interested in hearing the story before I go on

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to tell you what happened (I omit many of the decorative flourishes that appear in the original and some of the twists and turns from my own version).

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There once lived, in the city of Cairo, a poor cobbler called Marouf. He spent his days mending shoes - a job at which he was not particularly skillful - and speculating as he worked about his true station in life which, he was sure, was exalted. Some day, he told himself, the truth would come out and he would be revealed as what he really was - Marouf the ... king - or something.

Meanwhile, he was a cobbler, and growing poorer by the day. One morning his wife sent him out with a jar of oil to buy a honey cake for her, but as he dreamed of the fortune he would make by selling the jar of oil he spilt it, and so he arrived at the baker's shop empty handed, hoping for credit.

He got more than credit, for that morning something amazing had happened to the baker. He had found a golden chair leg, and Marouf in his excitement forgot all about the honey cake. Perhaps this was the solution to his own miserable life. How did the poor baker get a golden chair leg? By praying, said the baker, and went off to sell his find, a rich man.

Marouf decided to pray. But how? Time passed as he experimented but he was out of practice. While he was still trying, he was interrupted by the baker, who was still offering his chair leg for sale; no one would buy it - too much gold; it was useless to him. As the baker lamented his fate, the prophet Abraham appeared and offered to take him to Paradise, for a look at the place where he would be for all eternity. The Baker accepted. Marouf, though, failed to see the meaning of what had happened, and treated the incident as an interruption to his attempts to pray.

Once more he made the effort, but this time it was his wife who intruded. She was tired of waiting, and had come to see what her husband was up to. The quarrel that ensued was the last straw. Marouf ran from the bakery and his wife, and took refuge in a ruined mosque on the outskirts of Cairo. There some strange things began to happen.

First, he met the baker, returning from paradise. To Marouf's questions he describes his own place in paradise - all gold, down to a golden chair. But the baker's chair had only three legs, since he had acquired the fourth on earth, and after a moment's regret he had given back the fourth. Now he was a happy man. As he left, he gave Marouf/on how to pray - but  
advice

before Marouf could benefit from it a second strange thing happened. He was confronted by the inhabitant of the mosque, Abdal (which means 'the perfected one'), who asked Marouf what he wanted. To get away, replied Marouf.

Abdal then proposed a three-stage plan: first Marouf must awake, then he must die, then he can be born. Marouf accepted and Abdal told him to climb on his back.

All at once Marouf found himself suspended high above Cairo. It was nighttime. The lights of houses looked like fireflies. People were tiny crawling shapes. There was a rushing in his ears - a storm? No, said Abdal, the beating of the wings of a giant bird, the Roc, whose open beak is the beginning of our journey ...

Marouf panicked. He begged to be set down, and as quickly as he had left the earth he was returned to it. Abdal vanished and Marouf was in a crowded bazaar in a strange city.

In this place, called by its inhabitants Ikhtyan, Marouf was accosted by a stranger, who offered to make him rich. All Marouf had to do was to pretend that he had an enormous baggage train coming: everyone would believe him, lend him money, and with this money he would buy and sell and so be able to <sup>pay</sup> off his debts. "In the country where nobody knows you," said the stranger, "you can be anything you wish."

Marouf followed the man's advice, and accepted the merchants' money, but instead of using it to buy and sell he began to give it away to the poor. And as he discovered that such generosity only served to increase his credit with the merchants, he borrowed more, and gave that away too. Finally, the man who had suggested the plan could stand it no longer. You have to start trading, he said, or you won't get rich, and then how will you pay back the money you've borrowed? Marouf's answer staggered him.

"Why should I worry?" said Marouf. "Am I not a rich man? When my baggage train comes, they shall be paid, twice over!"

His lie had become truth for him.

The man disappeared, and Marouf found himself facing the queen of the country, being questioned by the malicious Vizier. But he boldly went on with his imposture, and succeeded in convincing her that there was indeed vast wealth coming to him across the desert. To lay her hands on the treasure became the Queen's one thought, and she offered Marouf the hand of her daughter in marriage. He accepted. To satisfy the Vizier's suspicions, the Queen instructed her daughter, the Princess, to worm the truth out of him on their wedding night.

The Princess did as she was told and Marouf, unable to pretend in the face of her searching questions, confessed the truth. But instead of betraying him to her mother, the Princess helped him to escape into the desert, promising to follow him later when she had stolen money from the palace treasury.

The desert was no ordinary desert, but a place of opportunities, if he could only grasp them. First, the desert wind came, and tried to teach him how to weep, but Marouf proved a dunce at this simple exercise. He did better when he met a ploughman who asked him to plough in return for fetching some food for Marouf. Marouf accepted without question, and as he ploughed the barren soil, he felt the blade of the plough strike something metallic. It was a ring. Rubbing the ring to test its value, he was confronted by a Jinn. The way out of the desert was before him.

But Marouf's troubles were not over. Though the magic ring gave him everything he wanted, including a baggage train, he allowed himself to be tricked out of it by the crafty Vizier, who immediately banished Marouf to the desert again.

This time Marouf was put through a more serious test, or series of tests - the monstrous Roc almost devoured him,

a wandering Dervish attempted to instruct him, a magician led him almost to the goal he had been seeking all this time but in a moment of hesitation Marouf allowed the prize to slip away. It was only thanks to the Princess, who had cleverly managed to get hold of the ring from the Vizier, that Marouf was saved from his second sojourn in the desert.

Back with his Princess Marouf cannot help coveting the fateful ring. In spite of her warning that if he takes it he will lose her, Marouf persuades the Princess to give it back to him. For a moment he exults in its unassailable power. Then he realizes that something is missing. He rubs the ring and summons the Jinn. Fetch my wife, he says.

The Jinn does so and Marouf sees before him - his wife from Cairo. The princess, says the Jinn, is dead.

The Jinn cannot explain the mystery - he can only act, not think, and Marouf has a moment of indecision. Then, instinctively, he makes the gesture that destroys the power of the ring, and resumes his cobbling.

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Such, in its outlines, is the story of Marouf, the Cobbler of Cairo. Apart from its obvious magical and fairy tale qualities,

it contains a myriad of interlocking and reflecting mirror images, and it consistently defies logic, or at least our normal idea of logic, both in the plot and in the relations between characters. And yet, because it belongs to an ancient tradition, it is indestructible and turns out to have a defiantly persistent logic of its own. I use the word 'defiant' deliberately, because any attempts to interpret it on any terms but its own are frustrated as if by some consciously uncompromising force.

In the version that was presented last month, the director and actors tried to find in it something that they could understand on the level of their experiences with other plays out of the western dramatic tradition. The story, however, resisted them. It lived its own life to one side, as it were, of the life they were trying to convey on stage. The result was confusing to audiences, who had the impression that what they were watching was somehow mysteriously out of step with itself. For myself, having made the decision to step back and let someone else cast and direct it, it was painful, but I felt that it would be wrong to inject myself at that point and turn the whole thing around to face in another direction.

But rather than dwell on the negative aspects of all this, I'd like to talk about some of the positive results that came



out of the event. First, the script, which up till then had remained somewhat of an enigma to me, began to yield up some of its secrets. I saw in the material a series of inner connections that I would feel much more confident of bringing to life in a second production. These are of two kinds: the power of thought, or imagination, to shape reality; and the power of the material world, represented in the Marouf tale by the baggage train and the ring, to alter relationships in the realm of values.

We make distinctions, for the purposes of everyday life, between lies and the truth, but in Marouf's cosmos there are no such distinctions, merely different degrees of power, or intensity. Reality is constantly being transformed - by faith, or desire, by prayer, or by spell.

Esoteric tradition contains this concept ('thought forms', the material projections of strong emotions and acts of will, or the Indian mantram); so do fairy tales, with their accounts of people who wish for something unthinkingly and then get it, often to their dismay. The story of Marouf, then, is in part about creating your own reality - through imagination, desire, spells, or prayer.

But in order to tap that source of power, we have to be in

a certain state of mind, "ready" in a variety of ways. The Arabian Nights and other stories give a number of suggestions as to how this can be accomplished, and I intend to follow them up in the next few weeks.

The Marouf story also shows us that along with the power to change the world comes the responsibility to know exactly what to wish for. Depending on the way you interpret the significance of your life, some of your wishes are correct and should be pursued; others are not. In the light of experience we usually know which is which - but by then it is too late. What we need is a way of seeing our existence that enables us to ask for the right thing before it is too late.

The solution to this dilemma lies in the discovery of what we might call a personal myth, the life pattern that best suits the individual.\* Marouf can't find his, and ends up where he started - though not quite. He knows it's there, and in that sense he has learnt something which, at some other time or place, he might be able to use. Which is perhaps what happened to me as a result of this production.

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\* I've said more about this in an article in HARPER'S MAGAZINE in the current (January 1974) issue, in the section on dharma.

As I watched Marouf in performance and tried to detach myself enough to make mental notes about how it should be done in the future, I asked myself whether a folk tale, or even a group of folk tales, could be made to carry the burden of all this philosophical baggage. I think it can, because it already does, but in order for any of this baggage to be delivered to an audience much more has to be done than merely offer an interesting script or a few unusual actions and effects on stage.

It begins with the state of mind in which the work is approached. It begins, that is, before the beginning. And then, in the course of this work, both performers and everyone else involved must consciously work at shedding many of their preconceptions about fact and fiction, time and place, metaphor and reality. Finally, some way must be found of preparing the audience, as the audience is prepared for any show that it attends; in this case the psychological set is as important as the one on stage.

What does all this mean in practical terms? In the course of the past month, when not involved in Marouf, I've been thinking about this. Using the experiences of the previous two months I've started to write the scenario of the kind of event that would lend itself to the effects I have in mind. It will tackle some of the problems posed by Marouf, but in a more formal

way, and by the end of this month I hope to be able to tell you something about the results of this, at least in a preliminary way.

If these techniques turn out to be workable, there will be a need for a longer piece, more accessible to an audience, to which they can be applied. So whenever I get the chance I'm storing up material for this too: one productive source seems to be stories out of the common pool of American and European heroic legend; another is a 'myth' which I see as having a genuine contemporary currency, spreading and sprouting in many places over the past decade. More about these as they take shape.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kenneth Cavander", with a horizontal line underneath.

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on January 4, 1974