

Die Dame mit der bemalten Hand

(The Lady with the Painted Hand)

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Musa al-Lahuri had to sign three copies of the certificate attesting to the authenticity of his astrolabe. The three magnificently calligraphed documents his client had ordered were ceremoniously spread out on a table under a baldachin in the garden, which seemed to occupy a special place in his client's heart, like all the man's riches. Now, with a great many words, his client passed him the reed pen. The master astronomer suppressed a sigh and affixed his full name to all three deeds: Ustad Musa ibn Zayn ad-Din Qasim ibn Qasim ibn Lutfullah al-Munaggim al-Lahuri.

The client's house lay along the old trade route, in a dreary warehouse district between the Panvel market and the port. There was also a Portuguese church, which the client had purchased and which now also functioned as a warehouse where he stored various goods: indigo, opium, canvas—Musa had been subjected to the entire list but had promptly forgotten it. He had traveled yesterday from Manbai, where he had his lodgings, for the express purpose of delivering the astrolabe, and had already spent one night here. For hours (over admittedly very good food) he had listened to the client—who was also Persian—prattle on about his house, his life, his fate, his beneficence, his children and his wares, whose market values he listed in detail. Then the man began to haggle over the price of the astrolabe, despite the fact that the sale had already been agreed upon by correspondence, and was long past the point of haggling. As he did this, the client led Musa first on an extended tour of his house, so he could show off its splendors, and eventually on a never-ending stroll through this high-walled garden, which seemed somewhat out of place in the ugly neighborhood. He led the astronomer this way and that: along a little tiled stream, in

between roses and fragrant mallows, and then in circles underneath bird cages perched on slender fluted columns. The garden paths were wet. The baldachin was also wet, so that some steam had collected underneath. The fact it had rained out of season – “contrary to the teachings of astronomy” as the client weightily declared, to the annoyance of the astronomer – seemed to discombobulate the man so much he was unable to draw any further conclusions and simply stood there, lingering stubbornly in the dampness.

From the warehouses came the sound of hammering and shouting. Perhaps they were putting a new roof on the church. Musa glanced up at the blue vault of the baldachin and studied the steam swirling around his client’s head. This particular client wore many layers of garments, a jade clasp in his turban, rubies in his ears, and generally exuded a great sense of gaiety. Musa bowed as he returned the reed pen.

The certificate of authenticity was a senseless document. One scrap of paper could easily be swapped for another. As a rule, Musa signed his instruments in brass. The client had also ordered a display stand constructed using all the best and expensive materials: ebony, silver, ivory and some Chinese lacquer, but the stand was as pointless as the certificate. Musa’s astrolabe was a small disk-type designed to fit in the palm of a hand: it was of no use perched on display. But the client wouldn’t be using it anyway. He understood nothing about the heavens and nothing about mathematics. At best, thought Musa, this tedious client might be able to tell the moon from the sun and night from day although perhaps not even always that. He simply collected astrolabes to show off. And an original piece by al-Lahuri was a terrific thing to show off with, even if it was idiotically set on a stand. The master’s astrolabes were highly coveted. A single sale was funding a good part of his journey, from Jaipur to Manbai and over the sea to the holy cities.

For hours the client had had a servant trail behind him carrying the astrolabe on its stand, holding it in place with a little cloth: through the house, through the garden and finally under the damp baldachin. Now at last it was his very own, and right here on his table. He quoted the poet: *the bowl of night has flung the stone*, etc. As though al-Lahuri hadn't heard that enough in his life. But he made another bow.

New servants appeared. But instead of producing Musa's payment they brought large bowls of fruit and English cordial served in dainty English glasses. The client pontificated a while about the English, with whom he was evidently engaged in trade, and then, after abundant courtesies, uttered the word "alidade." He repeated it several times with no sentence attached. He even bowed to the astronomer and murmured the word "alidade" as though it were an incantation, his lips practically touching Musa's ears.

"Yes," said Musa, "that's on the back."

For the first time since his departure, Musa felt a certain longing for Jaipur. No one there would have dared repeat "alidade" to him in such a foolish, disjointed manner. It was like someone going up to a cobbler and muttering "sole, sole." In all probability "alidade" was the only scientific word the client knew, which is presumably why he insisted on casting this seed in the hope it might sprout and spark an entire conversation. He took the cloth the servant had been using to handle the astrolabe, picked up the instrument himself, held it right in front of its creator's nose and exclaimed once again: "Alidade!"

Musa al-Lahuri loathed having things held up to his nose. For some time now his eyes were no longer able to focus on anything that was too close. He was approaching fifty, and he knew that people his age began to see nearby objects less clearly. And this was not a

disease that required a physician, merely a minor and entirely impersonal punishment from God, which was visited upon every person and which every person had to make peace with for better or worse. But not every person fashioned the best astrolabes in Hindustan. Musa al-Lahuri reserved the right to be annoyed.

He held the instrument a little away from his face, not so near that it became a blur, and not so far that the client would see him stretching his arm to look at small things the way very old people do. Wistfully, Musa examined the astrolabe. It had turned out beautifully, and here it had landed in the house of an oaf. Musa flipped it around, placed his finger on the alidade and moved it so that it transected the shadow square.

“If you want to determine how high the sun is over the horizon, for instance,” he said gently, “you position the alidade so that a sunbeam passes through both sights and onto your hand, then you read the altitude scale. Next turn the astrolabe around, locate the sun’s position on the zodiac, and move the ankabut like this so that the sun is in the correct altitude within the mukantara quadrant. Notice how it is divided into six degrees per circle. At night you use a similar method: you look for the altitude of two stars, as indicated by the ankabut, and align the alidade with the height of the stars as visually observed. Then you take the time using the pointer on the hajra. Spin the sun on the ankabut. Align it with the eastern horizon. Now you know when the sun will rise, the actual sun of the heavens, and you will know the length of the actual day. All quite self-evident.”

Silence hung over the pavilion. A water droplet fell from the indigo blue zenith onto the table. At last the client’s steward appeared with the money. Musa felt the need to explain all the various applications of the astrolabe, even if it took ten hours. He turned the

instrument over in his hand, let his finger move the pointer around the rete, and took a deep breath. His client lowered his head a little.

“God willing,” said Musa.

Accompanied by his servant Malik, Musa walked down to the river, which bore the same name as the town, boarded the ship that was waiting for him, and made his way back to Manbai.

It was a pathetic little boat, no better than the one from the previous day. The slanting triangular sail made it look half capsized, and neither the owner nor the men who worked for him inspired much trust. The Panvel River was full of silt and sand, the banks washed out, the water brown. As the ship fought its way through all manner of refuse and debris, the skipper grumbled away in the street slang of Manbai, presumably about the absence of wind or the meagerness of his payment. Or perhaps it was the street slang of Panvel. Every little town in Hindustan had a different language. Even Musa al-Lahuri couldn't learn them all. “Should swift landing be achieved, ship's master shall be rewarded,” he said grumpily in Sanskrit. The skipper looked at him with reverence. He probably hadn't understood a word and thought that his passenger was praying.

The astronomer stood in the bow, as far away as possible from the sail. The ship battered its way out to sea. Among the flotsam a black bird gnawing away at the carcass of a goat. For a moment Musa thought it was reckless to be floating around the world with all the money his client had paid him. Thank god he had a dagger and a saber, and that Malik was a strong young man. And suddenly he pictured the ship's owner trying to sneak up on him

from behind, and himself whirling around and stabbing the man with glee, and thereby becoming the new owner of the vessel. Then he would toss the villain's corpse overboard, and from that point on would lead the life of a pirate, under a false name and possibly disguised as an Indian, sailing his pitiful tub around the seven islands, year after year, far from his home, his family, and his profession.

Ever since his eyesight began to weaken—at times he saw himself blind and screeching for help like an old man everyone hopes will soon die—he had frequently been plagued by such phantasmagoria. He had spent decades in the observatory of the prince of Jaipur observing the stars and making his calculations. And for decades there had been yawning gaps between the observations and the calculations—gaps that resisted closure no matter how many new calculations and observations he made. At one time he had railed against this disparity. At one time these gaps had robbed him of his sleep. Now he slept for as long as people let him, and in between he jotted his daily tabulations for all the stars precisely as observed. And fashioned astrolabes for money. He was putting on more and more weight, and growing more and more weary. No wonder his soul was crying out for change.

Al-Lahuri indulged himself with a smile. Soon he would be in Arabia. There he would find sense and meaning. Arabia, so it was said, was home to all meaning: the meaning of heaven and earth, the meaning of God and man, the meaning of all things. And as he had done so often, he repeated the word “meaning” in his head: in Persian, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and in the street slang of Jaipur, and continued by recalling all twenty words in Sanskrit that stood for “sense,” or possibly also “nonsense.” Sanskrit was a strange

language. He called for his servant, and hoped that the eternally clumsy man wouldn't fall into the sail the way he had the day before.