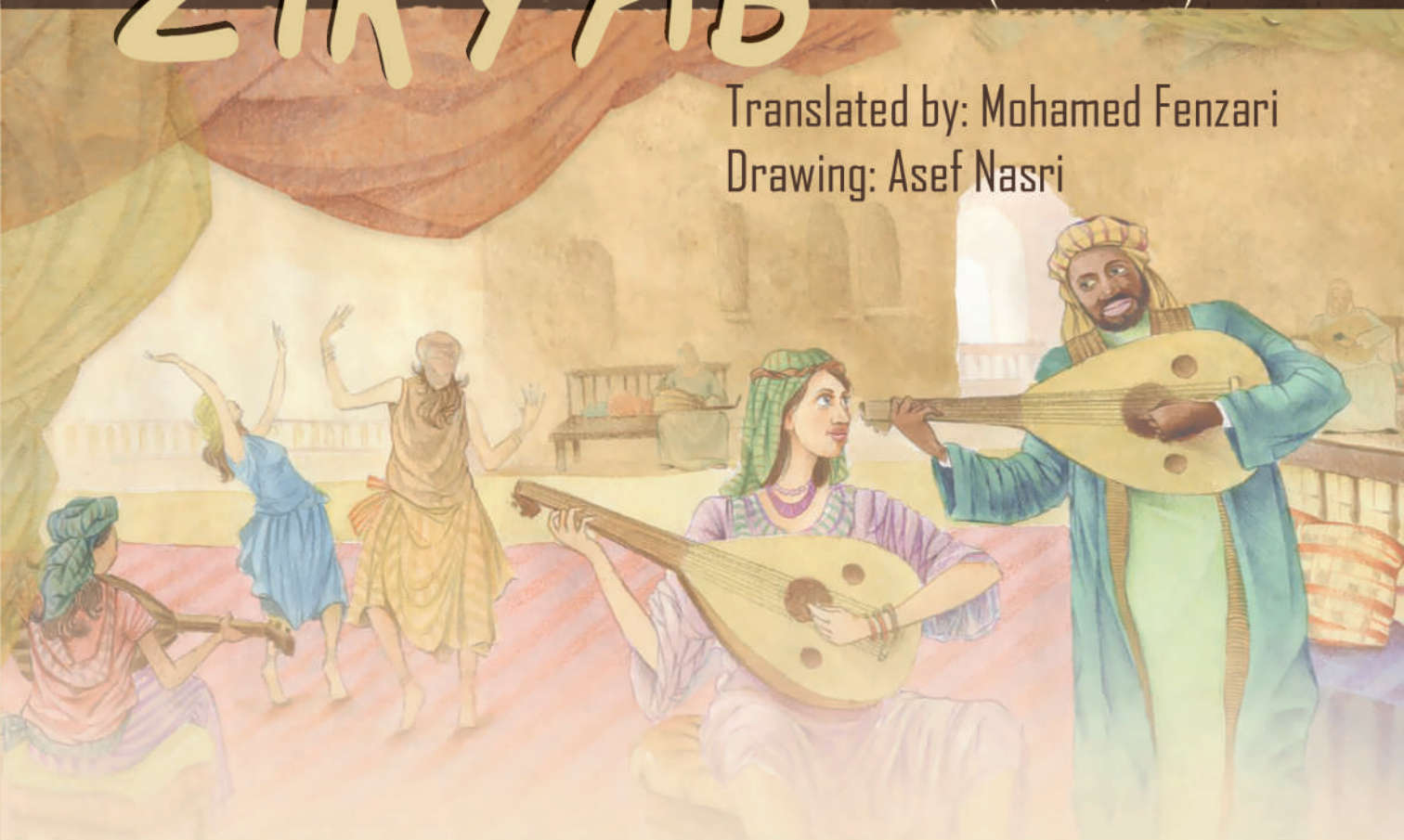
 The Series of Those Who Lit the Path: 2

The Teacher of People and Chivalry

ZIRYAB

Dr. Sanaa Shalan
(bint Na'imah)

Translated by: Mohamed Fenzari
Drawing: Asef Nasri

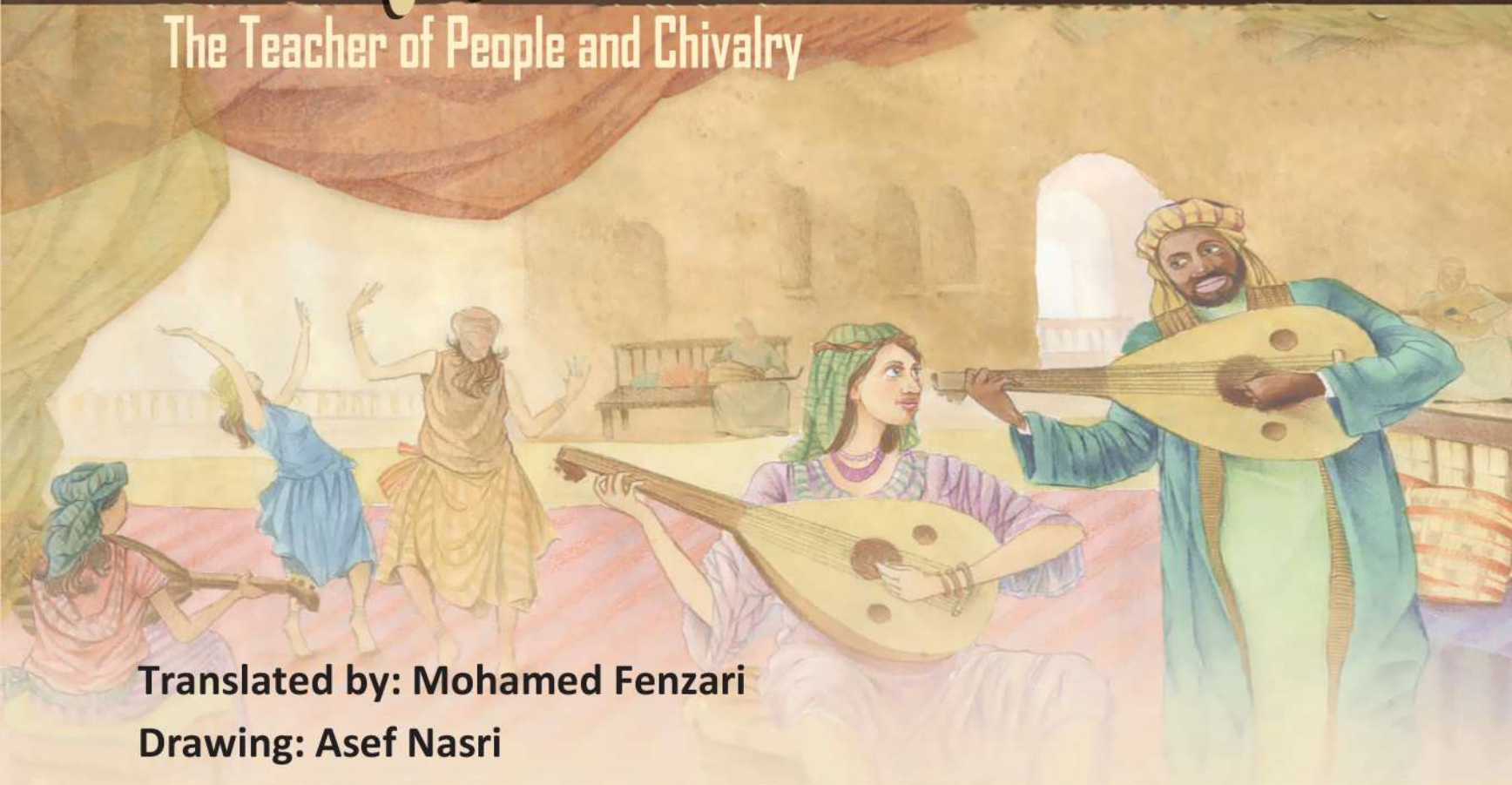


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Ziryab

"The Teacher of People and Chivalry"

The Unknown Dark-skinned Man



He did not know much about himself, nor about his origin. Rather, he was ignorant (**did not know**) of his people and his family. He did not know his father, mother, or homeland. Therefore, he did not know the identity of the one who granted him (**gave him**) the name Ali, nor the one who gave him the nickname (**named him**) Abi al-Hassan. All he knew was that he was Abu al-Hassan Ali bin Nafis, nicknamed Ziryab, and that he was a dark-skinned boy owned by the Abbasid Caliph (**the ruler**) al-Mahdi, and that he lived among hundreds of slaves in the caliphate court.

Yet, he felt, despite the inferiority (**insignificance**) of his origin, that he was completely different from other slaves and lords. His hopes were high and knew no bounds. He was fully prepared to fight for their realization. He dreamed of sitting on a throne, not like that of the caliph al-Mahdi or the caliph Harun al-Rashid, but on a throne of another kind, a throne that would place him with the immortals and record his name in a compilation (**a big book**) of the greats. He wished to possess great wealth, a wealth that is not of money and jewels, but a wealth of melodies, fame, and glory.

He did not remember much about his childhood, but he remembered exactly that happy moment when he had joined Ishaq al-Mawsili to learn singing and playing musical instruments. Ishaq was senior teacher of singers and a famous musician in Baghdad who was close to the caliph. That day he almost flew out of happiness. For the first time in his life, he grabbed an oud (**an orient musical instrument**), pulled it to his chest, and proceeded (**began**) to strum its strings, then he recited (**sang**) some of the songs he had memorized.

His voice was beautiful and gentle, enchanting whoever heard it. From that day on, he was nicknamed Ziryab, which means a black bird with a tender voice. Ziryab was able to sing like a bird and to transform sorrows, heartaches, wishes and words into melodies.



His hands were capable of strumming (playing an instrument with fingers) the strings and making the sweetest tunes and melodies. He was confident that there were more magical melodies that people had not yet discovered. Therefore, he would immerse himself (sit for so long) in listening to his melodies, and intoning every sound he heard, so that he could endow (give) humanity with the melodies it had not discovered yet.

If he was sad or afraid, he would play some tunes to be happy and feel that the world was in his possession. He wholeheartedly wished to sit on the throne of melodies and become the king of composition (**singing**), but the journey to realize his wish was very long.

He used to listen to music passionately (**with love**), and learn it from his creative teacher, Ishaq al-Mawsili, tirelessly (**non-stop**). During his little spare time, he devoted himself to studying and acquiring knowledge until he became acquainted, in a short period of time, with great and wide knowledge of arts. He turned into (**became**) a scholar of the stars, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and politics. He knew the division of the seven regions and the difference in their natures and air. He learned how kind and true friendship should be, with the skill of court service (**serving the kings**).

He had also memorized ten thousand songs along with their melodies. His dream was to meet the caliph Harun al-Rashid and gain (**obtain**) a high position like that enjoyed by his teacher Ishaq al-Mawsili. Who knows? Harun al-Rashid may make him his private singer. He was getting ready (**preparing himself**) for this meeting that would change the entire course of his life.

The expected historical meeting between the King of Arabs (**Harun Al-Rashid**) and the King of Music (**Ziryab**) took place, a meeting not destined to be repeated. The caliph Harun al-Rashid was longing for listening to new songs and melodies, and Ishaq al-Mawsili took the vow (**promised himself**) to realize his wish. Therefore, he presented Ziryab to him for the first time. Harun al-Rashid asked the young dark-skinned man if he could sing. Ziryab said: 'Yes, I am good at singing as people are, and more of what I am good at, people are not. I can sing what only suits your highness of what is good, and nothing shall be kept hidden except for you. And if you wish, I will sing for you a song no ear had ever heard?'

Harun was excited to hear the melodies of Ziryab, who refused to play his teacher's oud, and preferred to play an oud he had made himself.

The oud was three times the weight of his teacher's, strings made of silk that had never been washed with hot water so as not to be loose.

Then Ziryab rushed into singing:

1- O, Harun, auspicious of kings,

Whenever people come to you, innovation strings.

When he completed his lyrical poem, al-Rashid almost flew with joy at what he had heard. He praised Ziryab and thanked Ishaq al-Mawsili for this meeting. He ordered Ishaq to do good to his student until finishing his term. He found in him what he did not find in other singers in terms of the beauty of the voice, the sweetness of the melody, and the good performance. He expected a brilliant future for Ziryab. Ziryab's heart beat at what he had heard, and he almost fell (**bent**) on the hands of Harun al-Rashid to kiss them.

As for Ishaq, being jealous and envious of his talented student tore the veins of his heart apart.



Departure from Baghdad

Ziryab was worried despite his happiness. He saw in the eyes of his teacher what he had not seen before. Ziryab's intuition came true. As soon as Ishaq al-Mawsili was alone with his witty (**smart**) student, he told him, with anger apparent (**visible**) in his eyes: "O Ali, envy is the oldest of diseases and the most lethal (**deadly**). Life is infatuating. Partnership in a craft is hostile, and there is no way to resolve it (**eliminate it**). Your excellence and good performance have worsened me, and I fear that you will take my stature (**my high position**) at the caliph Harun al-Rashid. You have two choices without a third: either you go away in the wide land (**travel**), and I hear from you nothing after you give me your vows (**assuring promise**) and I help you with money, or you stay here and get acquainted with my hatred, and I will be killing you for a fact (**for sure**)."



Ziryab was silent for a while and felt very sad, as he would leave Baghdad, which he loved. He would abandon his teacher who taught him the oud; he would travel to a land he did not know. Yet, he was sure that his teacher's envy and anger were greater than everything. As he knew that his teacher had influence in the state, that it would be easy to kill him, and that he was the weak dark-skinned man who had no help, he decided to go for (take) the path (way) of safety and leave Baghdad without coming back so that he, his family, and his art could be saved.

Ziryab looked into the eyes of his teacher, who was impatiently waiting for his decision, and said with a broken and sad heart: "I accept, my teacher, to leave Baghdad with my family."

"And I will give money for your journey", said Ishaq al-Mawsili, while feeling great relief. "I will leave Baghdad in a few days after I have finished packing my luggage and telling my wife and children", said Ziryab.

"No, you will leave tonight right after sunset, and in the morning, Baghdad will be mine alone," replied Ishaq firmly.

"As you wish, my teacher, I will leave tonight", said Ziryab with resignation.

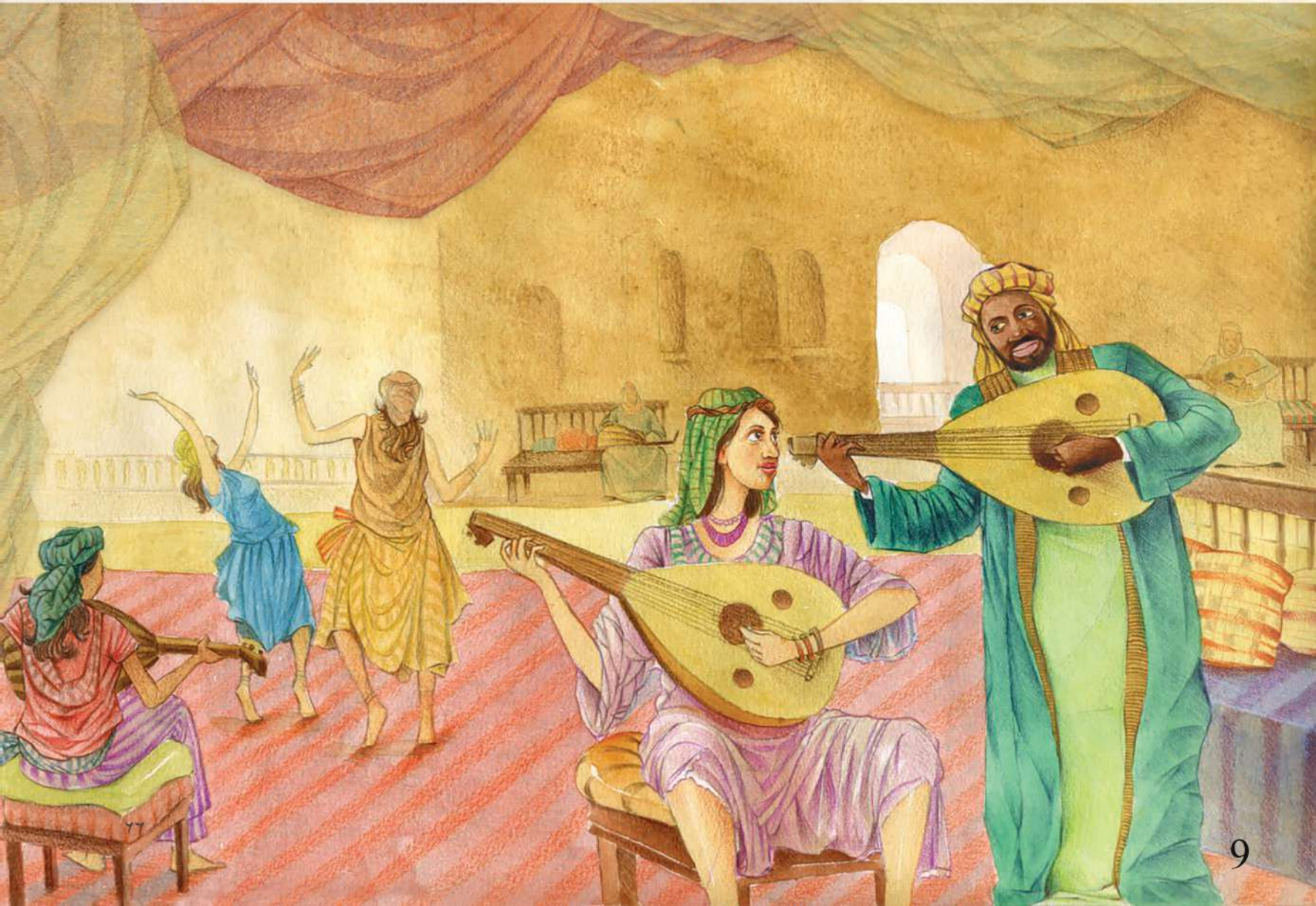
That night in Baghdad, people were sleeping in peace and security, while Ziryab, his wife, and his children were carrying their little belongings and sneaking out (secretly) from the city, guarded by the men of Ishaq al-Mawsili who brought them outside the walls of the city. The bundle of money from Ishaq was all what his expelled student owned, feeling great sadness while taking a last farewell look at Baghdad. He realized with his tender heart that it was a parting without a meeting, and that he would not see Baghdad again.

That night, Ziryab embraced his oud and sang for a long time. He decided to bid farewell (say goodbye) to Baghdad with his beautiful melodies, for he had nothing else other than them, and he was expelled from the city he loved because of them.

As for the caliph Harun al-Rashid, as soon as he asked to see Ziryab to hear his melodies, Ishaq al-Mawsili told him that Ziryab had gone insane (mad), and that he was no longer aware of what he was doing. Harun al-Rashid was deeply sorry for the destiny of Ziryab whom he expected he would have a bright future. This was the last account (news) about Ziryab in the court of Harun al-Rashid and in the entire Arab East, until he shone again (became famous) in Andalusia (Spain).

The strenuous (tiring) journey

Ziryab did not know where to turn his face (go). He was confused, as he knew nothing in the world except Baghdad. He decided to go to the Levant, but it did not meet his dream expectations. So, he soon left it and headed to the Maghreb, which was a new country trodden (entered) by Arab Muslims. He hoped to find in it what he had been looking for in Baghdad in terms of fame, creativity, and appreciation from the commoners (ordinary people) and the nobles (the rulers and masters of the people).



Ziryab began a long and an arduous (tiring) journey to Morocco (North Africa), during which he and his wife and children endured (suffered from) a lot of troubles. Their money, of which they spent most on their long journey to Morocco, was almost over. The unknown was waiting for Ziryab, but hope drove him to continue his journey. It was his love for his children, his wife and his playing on his oud throughout the journey that helped him to stay patient. He always peeked (looked secretly) at his children, and he was happy to see them trying to imitate him in playing the oud and singing some of the songs he used to sing for them.

Finally, Ziryab arrived in Morocco and went to the service of Ziyadat Allah I, the Aghlabid Sultan (ruler) of Kairouan next to Tunisia. His residence was good and quiet. The Sultan liked to hear Ziryab sing and play. Therefore, he gave him enough money, but Ziryab still felt like a broken bird in the cage of the Sultan, not allowed to fly in the sky of the music he loved.

Ziryab's ambition was beyond being a humble singer (of a small status) in the court of any sultan. He wanted to be crowned on the throne of composition, and to be released (to become free), to run like wild horses in the fields of his unique (distinguished) talent.

The wisdom of God Almighty triggered a dispute (a quarrel and enmity) between Ziryab and the Sultan of Kairouan, who criticized Ziryab for his dark skin (he ridiculed Ziryab because of his colour). Then, Ziryab sang a poem which went as follows:

1. If my mother was a black from the sons of Ham,
For which you criticised me
2. I am gentle, like a white antelope.
And a noble black if you challenge me.
3. Had it not been for your escape in war,
I would have killed you, or you would have me killed.

Then, the Sultan became very angry at Ziryab. He ordered his death; then he said to him: "If I find you in my country after three days, I will behead you (cut off your head)."

Once again, Ziryab packed his luggage and set off with his wife and children on a new journey, the end of which he did not know. This time, he decided to head to Andalusia (Spain), where Arabs were witnessing a great civilization, and where scholars and talented people were met with respect and appreciation. He went on to realize his intention (what he intended to do). He and his family crossed the Atlantic Ocean and stopped in an area known as the Green Island. He wrote a long letter in an eloquent and a beautiful language to the King of Cordoba, who was then al-Hakam al-Awwal bin Hisham. He explained to him his talent and abilities. The king, who was known for his passion (love) for music, was happy with the letter and invited Ziryab to come as an honourable guest.



Ziryab was pleased with this invitation. He headed to Cordoba with his family, but death surprised the king, whose news reached Ziryab while he was on the way to him. Ziryab felt very disappointed and was almost about to return from where he came. Yet, the king's messenger, the singer Mansour al-Yahudi, tried to convince him to stay in the hospitality of the new King Abd al-Rahman II, nicknamed al-Awsat, who surpassed his father in love for music, and in his desire to host Ziryab. The singer finally succeeded in persuading Ziryab to go to King Abd al-Rahman II and wrote to him an urgent letter informing him of his coming with Ziryab. So, the new king responded, welcoming the guest and promising him kind reception and good hospitality.

Lucky Ziryab

Ziryab's intuition came true. He expected the hospitality (**good reception**) of King Abd al-Rahman II, who, himself, went out in 822 at the head of the group of recipients to receive Ziryab. The king gave Ziryab a fixed salary of two hundred dinars per month. He also paid a monthly salary of twenty dinars to his sons who came with him. They were four at the time: Abdul Rahman, Jaafar, Abdullah and Yahya. The king also gifted him (**gave him**) a castle to live in with his family, a tract of land and houses estimated at forty thousand dinars.

Three days later, Ziryab was invited to dine with the king. The king found him as skillful, intelligent, well-mannered, and knowledgeable with an outstanding (**excellent**) musical talent that made the king take him as a close friend and companion.

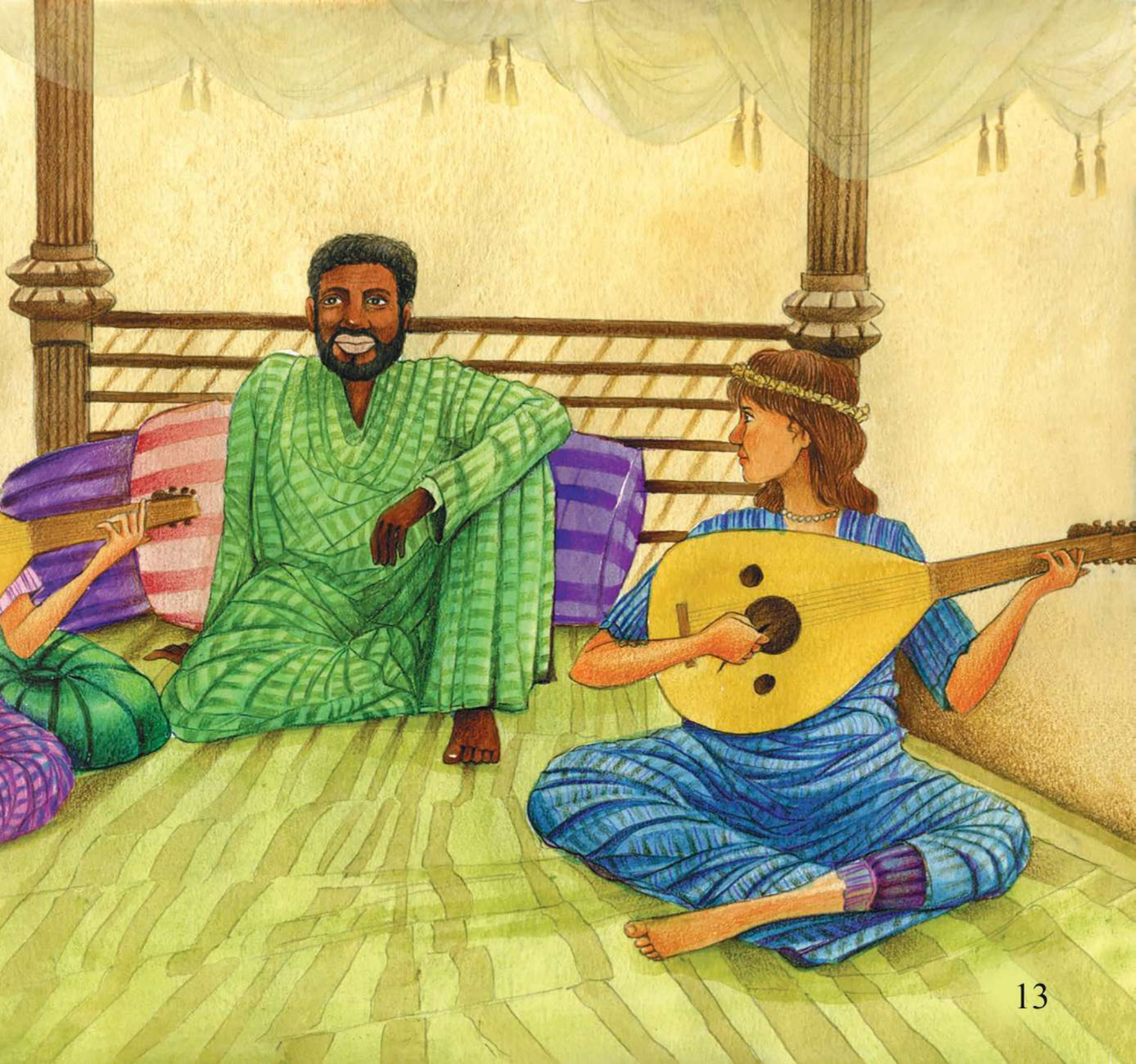
Ziryab became the guitar of the court that produced melodies and music all over the place, even throughout (**all over**) Cordoba. Ziryab became famous to the extent that his name was the only one mentioned even in the presence of great singers, such as: Mansur al-Yahudi Aloun, Zaraqoun, and al-Nisa'i al-Mughni. Ziryab felt good and realized that the time had come to build his musical throne and sit on it.

Ziryab establishing a music school

Life next to King Abd al-Rahman II was peaceful and happy after he gave money to Ziryab and made him one of his friends. Ziryab devoted himself to playing and singing until the oud overcame all his senses (**became the most important thing in his life**). If he dreamed of a melody at night, he would call his two maidservants, Ghizlan and Hunaida, and play and sing the melody he dreamed until it was completed. When Ziryab was satisfied with it, he would go back to sleep.

Ziryab's genius shone in Cordoba after he became known as Ziryab al-Qurtubi. He added a fifth string to the oud, which made it sound sweeter, and it has remained so to this day. He also made the plectrum (**the piece used to move the strings of the oud**) from the primaries (**large feathers at the front of the wing**) of the eagle instead of thin wood. Therefore, the sound of the oud became purer and resonant, in addition to the fact that the feathers are lighter on the fingers than wood and they perdure (**they last for a long period**).







Ziryab also introduced many types of maqamat (**melodic modes**) into Arabic songs, and established new singing rules, which the singers later adhered to (**stuck to**), and the adherence became a condition of good singing.

Ziryab wanted to transfer the legacy of his art and talent to others. So, he founded (**established**) a school for teaching music and singing in Cordoba, which remained in existence until the fall of the Arab Caliphate in Andalusia. It was the most famous school for teaching music and singing in his era. It was the nucleus (**core**) of many schools that were established later for the same purpose in Toledo, Valencia, Seville, and Granada (**cities in Andalusia**), and even in the Maghreb as well. They followed Ziryab's approach and his rules in playing and singing. This is what made Ziryab a pillar of Arabic singing, as the independent Andalusian song was born in his school. It had its own nature that paved the way for the emergence of Muwashahat (**Arabic poems with specific rhythm**), making the Andalusian song of a unique nature. He also renewed the form of melodies and the content of the songs.

Ziryab accepted only people who had a good voice and talent to be admitted to his school. In order to know this, he would ask applicants to shout loudly and say: o hajam or ah. If the voice continues in one level, he would accept them. If not, they would be rejected and advised not to take singing as a craft (**as a profession**).

After the applicants were admitted to the school, Ziryab would start a new journey of teaching and practice, starting from the simple up to the most difficult. He would start with teaching the rhythm to master the movements of melody, then singing on this rhythm non-stop, then singing with the rhythm, and so on.

A student would not graduate from Ziryab's school unless he became a skilled singer and musician. So, most of the female and male singers in Andalusia were students of Ziryab, such as Hunaida, Ghizlan, Mut`ah, whom King Abd al-Rahman admired (**loved very much**), and Masabih, the slave-girl of the writer Abi Hafs.

The sons and daughters of Ziryab were the first students at his school. They were ten, and each of them was gifted, being a guardian of singing and its teacher. Abd al-Rahman, the eldest son, Ahmed, Qasim, and Abdullah were the most distinguished among them. His daughter Hamdouna, the wife of the Minister Hashim bin Abdul Aziz was also better at singing than her sister, Aliyah, although Aliyah lived so long that she later became a pillar of singing, and the heiress of her father's glory.





Ziryab lived so long to fulfil his old dream. He, at last, sat on the throne of music and taught the most famous icons (the most famous singers) after he transformed Andalusian music from a mere imitation of Christians songs, or an imitation of an Arab camel companion (a person who sings to camels as they walk) into an art, having its own rules, principles, and etiquette.

Ziryab was proud and happy of his throne which he had made himself through hard work and distinguished talent. He was certain that he had acquired an extraordinary wealth that never dies, a wealth of creativity.

The Teacher of People and Chivalry

The dream of Abd al-Rahman II, King of Cordoba, was to live a life in his court similar to that of Harun al-Rashid. So, he was one of the most enthusiastic about royal service skills that Ziryab mastered (was good at). He had learned these skills in the Mahdi's court, where he was raised. Therefore, the kings of Andalusia took Ziryab as a role model (an example for them to follow), as he set for them manners and rules in all activities of life. Ziryab was not only a talented musician and singer, but he was a man who dreamed of building a world full of grace, taste, beauty, and bliss, to match his elegant music and sweet singing.

Ziryab believed in the importance of progress, well-being, etiquette, and rules for music to shine, and for singing to grow higher in an environment that valued art. Therefore, Ziryab transferred all the literatures of the Arab East to Andalusia. So, people imitated all his lifestyles. The Andalusians called him the teacher of people and chivalry, as he taught them kindness, delicacy, and taste (good manners and behaviour).

Ziryab brought many oriental culinary arts (food and its recipe) to Andalusia, such as: the stew called al-tafaya, which is prepared from fat mutton to which salt, pepper and a little water are added. He taught Andalusians to drink in goblets (glasses) made of thin and transparent glass, as they used to drink from metal utensils.

He was the one who conveyed to them the methods of making many perfumes from flower leaves. He also taught them ways to keep their clothes clean. He had opinions that were followed in matching clothes to seasons.



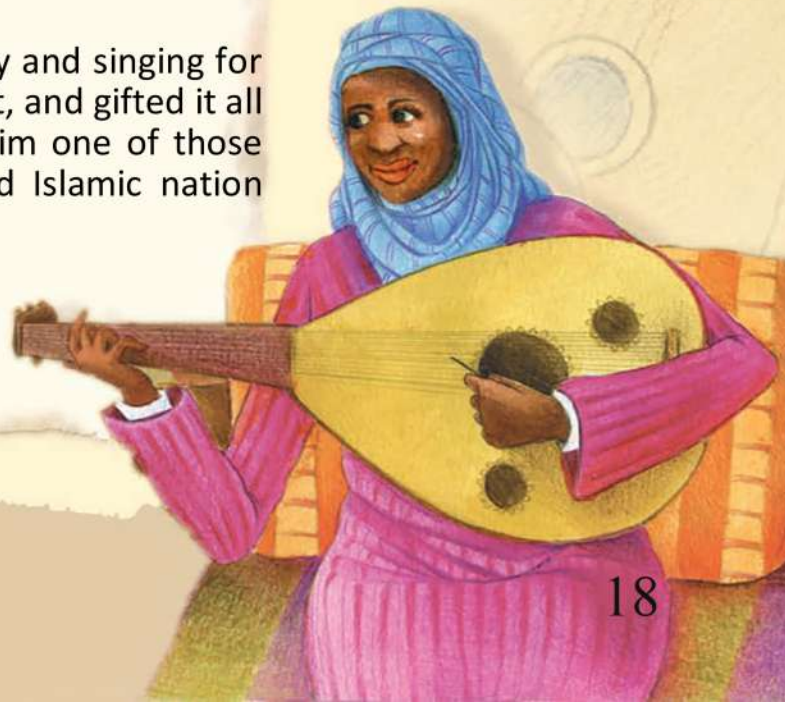
Ziryab became a funny phenomenon in Granada, as everyone imitated his clothing, food, and style of hairdressing. He was a trendsetter of the latest innovations in clothing, food, and hairdressing, and he was the pioneer of Cordoba in innovation, creativity, and elegance. He was the first to be remembered whenever one mentioned Andalusia.

Throne of Melodies

On 13 August 852, forty days before the death of Caliph Abd al-Rahman II, Ziryab died and departed from this world after he had reigned for a long time on the throne of music, leaving behind a great legacy of melodies, songs, poems, and playing rules.

He descended from his throne, which he had spent his life building, and left his music immortal after him forever, guiding the talented, and urging everyone to determination, will, and creativity. Ziryab's sons and daughters continued on his path, and once again praised singing on the foundation (basis) that their father, Ziryab, had built.

Ziryab was a candle that shone the way of melody and singing for an entire nation. He made music immortal, loved it, and gifted it all his life. So, it gave him immortality, and made him one of those who carried the beacon (light) for our Arab and Islamic nation throughout its glorious history.



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Dear children, I would be glad to know your thoughts on this story. Contact me at the following address:

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