



Source: Helene Cooper, Reuters, 'EU envoy tempts Iranians with package', *New York Times in The Age online*, 07/07/06.

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Señor Aguila 1575

If tale-telling had been profitable in the past for Miguel, it would now save his life or cause his death. All depended on the tale he was about to spin. Miguel's one-armed ugliness was enough reason for the perfumed Berber pirate commander before him to swing a sword across his throat.

Miguel lowered his eyes to the glint of the sword and opened his mouth, not knowing if his mix of Castellana and poor Arabic would be understood by this brute. His mind worked fast, finding elaborate lies to weave that would make this pillager smile upon him and spare his life. On finishing, he kept his head lowered, for the Berber said nothing, and Miguel's vision whirled with the fear of certain death.

It was minutes before the Berber laughed and pulled Miguel to his feet. He was saved! His yarn spinning had saved him for one more misadventure. Altair, Eagle, laughed the Berber, Altair!, pushing Miguel ahead of him onto the marauding ship. Altair, a reference to his hook nose. Then perhaps his life had been spared by his nose rather than the tale he had spun. Miguel thanked God and Allah for the gifts of his nose and his golden tongue.

Miguel's hook nose had earned him the title, Aguila Eagle, in prison. Back in those days, the debtors' prisons were full, of beggars and kings, of children and their mothers. Better food could be had in the gaols than on the street. It was said at the time that what the country needed was a good war.

Miguel's eagle nose gave him another talent. A sense of smell is greatly heightened when in dark places with hundreds defecating, vomiting and dying. Miguel knew well the smell of death, and more importantly, the smell of life. When the infirm lay dying and their loved ones had lost all hope, Miguel could smell the certainty of life. The accuracy of his predictions had earned him many centavos. What earned him more was his talent for story-weaving. He loved telling stories, true, false, lived, imagined, all a mish-mash of adventure and tragedy.

Like a fortune-hunter in one of his stories and with coins in his pocket, Miguel joined Spaniard forces in the war against the Turks—heathens and hated for, well, it wasn't clear why they were hated but King Phillip II had declared that Spain and Turkey were enemies, so there it was. A welcome war. The prison gates were flung open and the thousands poured out and onto ships bound for Corfu.

The horrors of the war were spared Miguel, for within days of sail, the boat was set upon by Berbers, Muslims from Africa and the crew was taken prisoner. Tossed upon seas which were hidden from sight by the decking above their heads, the prisoners were stacked body by body to wait out their fate. When the ship docked, the sudden sunlight blinded them. The shackles prevented Miguel

lifting his hands to shield his eyes. He squinted into daylight. Before him, a thriving port of multitudes of colours and odours. Lumbering through the crowds at the port were camels loaded with bolts of cloth and wine jugs. The smell of fresh lime juice mixed with the smell of sand, sea and manure. Men wearing simple white loose pants splashed water from metal buckets to dampen down the dust rising from so many feet. The chatter of commerce was in a language he recognized from the time in prison when he had befriended one Abu abd-Allah Muhammed el-Gahshigar, a small, wizened, bearded Muslim. Abu had taught him some Arabic phrases and some prayers to their god. Abu had spun stories of gold which weighed upon Miguel's ears like ingots.

The prisoners were led to a central market which thronged with palanquins, muscled black bearers and bearded merchants in flowing robes and turbans. The curtains of the litters, Miguel noted, were coloured and patterned but translucent so that the occupant could watch without being seen. They were brought to a covered place where the palanquins had been propped on top of stone platforms in a circular formation. The black slaves squatted on the ground, drawing circles in the sand and speaking quietly to each other without raising their heads. Turbaned men with sharp eyes stood at the ready beside each litter, with a paddle of gold and silver in their right hands.

Miguel suddenly realized that he was about to be purchased. High pitched squealing from a fat moustachioed man in the middle ended with each shackled prisoner being led away.

Miguel's turn came and duly he was purchased and led away. He did not farewell his fellow prisoners. He knew little of them. His shackles removed, he walked behind a fat man whose leather purse swung heavily with the weight of coins from an elaborately carved belt. Miguel's clothes were fouled, his hair wild, but he welcomed the fresh air and freedom. Freedom of a kind, for as soon as the entourage had reached their destination, a large wooden gate in a high blue-tiled adobe wall, Miguel was forced to kneel while the litter passed through the threshold. As he knelt, he heard a female voice from inside instructing his bearded companion who assented and bowed.

Then his new master was a mistress! News indeed! Perhaps she liked stories. All the women he had known liked his tale spinning. That he did not know their language bothered him little. He would learn it and get on in this new world. And now since he was amongst Muslims, he would begin with the stories of Scheherazade which he had learnt from his fellow prisoner and friend Abu. And thus, his very own one thousand and one nights of exile might pass swiftly.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.