A sturdy, credulous, good-natured fool was young Xailoun, nicknamed by his friends, and known by his neighbours, as Xailoun the Silly. Left with a small patrimony, which was gradually dwindling from his utter incompetence to manage it, his relatives persuaded him to marry, and induced a sensible woman, who could appreciate his goodness of heart, although she could not help despising his feebleness of mind, to accept him as her husband. His features were plain, yet not repulsive; he was gentle in his manners; his countenance was devoid of expression, his conversation trivial, but his disposition was excellent. So far from hurting anything, his weakness seemed to proceed from an excess of goodness: he could be persuaded to any act of folly, for he was a simpleton; yet not even coercion would have led him to crime, for he had an instinctive rectitude of principle. He was so hopelessly imbecile, that his wife, Oitba, after many a vain attempt, by caresses, remonstrances, and even by scolding, to induce him to work, for he was strong and healthy, as a final resource took to beating him, a penalty which he endured with equanimity, as the natural consequence of so foolish a delusion as marriage. Labour, in his estimation, was a needless exhaustion of strength: eating, sleeping, and day-dreaming, the chief, if not the sole, ends of existence. “Heaven wishes us to be happy,” he argued; “that which is pleasurable to one man is not so to another: ergo, as labour is your happiness, it is your duty to work; as repose is my happiness, it is my duty to abstain from toil.” He could reason plausibly enough, only his quaint conclusions were invariably deceptive. Perhaps his especial weakness was a sympathetic attachment to a species of lizard, which he called his cousin, a bright-eyed little creature, who, like himself, loved basking in the sun in stolid reverie. This harmless reptile has a peculiar jerk of the head, which the simpleton construed into a gesture of assent when he addressed it in his argumentative soliloquies. As the animal never contradicted him, he naturally preferred his respectful style of conversation to the contemptuous scoffing of his human associates.

When his fortunes sank to a low ebb, it became necessary to part with one of his asses. So Xailoun led it by a halter, stalking on before, and theorizing on matters wholly irrelevant to the sale. A rogue, who knew his softness both of heart and head, sily displaced the halter from the brute, put it on his own neck, and left his comrade to dispose of the stolen animal. He himself trudged on steadily for a while, until his companion was out of sight. Then fervently ejaculating, “Thanks to thee, O Prophet! for my restoration to the shape of man,” he disturbed the reverie of the simple peasant by an abrupt halt. “Halloo! what has become of my ass, and who are you?” was the not insensible address of the simpleton. “Your own ass, your faithful, hard-working donkey: thanks to the Prophet, I have had a kind master, too good for my deservings. I was a bad son, and in my wickedness
beat my poor old mother; for this impiety I was changed into a quadruped. But I
have repented my evil doings; my sin has been expiated, and I have become a man
again.” “Go in peace, friend,” said Xailoun; “it is rather hard I should lose by your
conversion, but of course I can’t sell you.” So the sharper departed, and not
having any better occupation, our hero journeyed on to the fair at which he had
proposed to have sold his donkey: to his surprise, he there beheld his own ass
exposed for sale by the rogue’s companion. “Oh! you incorrigible wretch,” said the
worthy simpleton, apostrophizing his old servant; “you had barely an hour to run
home and beat your mother, yet you must needs go and do it.” On his returning
home without money, Oitba’s cudgel read him a lecture on credulity, though he
vainly assured her that if the Prophet could transform a man into an ass for
beating a woman, he might transform a woman into an ass for beating a man.

Upon the whole, however, he improved under the discipline of the stick,
which he had not the energy to resist; and as “Change, or I will beat you to a
mummy,” was the habitual exordium of his wife as she drove him to labour, he
connected the idea of change with labour. He resolved to be changed.

He had grown meagre from want of food. So when he noticed how plump
and jolly-looking were the attendants at a baker’s shop, he thought, if he could
only look like them, his wife would not recognize him, and he should avoid being
beaten. He proffered his services, and for some time worked steadily, and carried
home his earnings to his family. Still he could not help perceiving that he was
recognized as Xailoun; and as the idea of change (connected with beating) had
been indelibly impressed upon him, and a chance blow occasionally followed an
act of silliness, he determined for the future to be a different man. “I am to be
beaten,” he argued, “if I be not changed; and if I would be changed I must be no
longer Xailoun.”

He now quitted the baker in despair, and asked employment at an
eating-house, where the servants looked so red and bloated, that he thought, if he
could only resemble them, his identity would be lost. Day by day he would stare
at his limbs to see how he was progressing, and this at length attracted the
attention of the keeper of the rooms. “Are you admiring yourself?” said he. “No, I
am only watching how my transformation is going on.” “Oh! you want to be
changed,” quoth he. “Changed? yes, that’s what I have come for.” “You shall be my
scullion then: you will be turned from white to black.”

So the simpleton scoured the dirty pots, and not being expert returned
home sooty from head to foot. His reception there was not cordial: his filthy
condition was not a source of commiseration for him, but of thwacking. “What
have I done to deserve this?” said the poor idiot. “You must change your mode of
life; you must become a different creature,” was the reply.

A pastrycook’s shop was the next resource, and the docility and willingness
of the young man obtained him constant employment. But the ass which ground
the flour having died, the master, who comprehended the weak nature of Xailoun,
gravely proposed to him to take its place. “If I do, I ought to have its dress,” was
his answer. So his whim was indulged, and he was harnessed with the blinkers, and other paraphernalia of a donkey.

The fatigue was so excessive, the giddiness from continually trotting round and round so maddening, that no sooner was he liberated from the yoke, than he started off, harness and all, and fled homewards at the top of his speed, to the boisterous delight of the urchins of the neighbourhood. So utterly pitiable did he look, that his stern monitress went supperless to bed, without administering an exhortatory castigation.

A new phase of the same idea now possessed him. "Heaven alone can change me; and how can my prayers be heard in this noisy city? I'll pray in the country, and as loud as I can." Accordingly he walked out into the suburbs until he arrived at a garden, where, being inordinately fond of fruit, and having a dim conception that he should be as much changed by feeding upon it as his lean ass, which he had not recognized after a few weeks' good pasture, had been, he asked employment from the owner. Being a strong, honest-looking fellow, he was hired at small wages, but with full permission to indulge his appetite. His mental weakness, however, was so perceptible, that his master, when in a dilemma, took advantage of it. One of the oxen having become temporarily incapacitated for work, he was persuaded to take its place, and was vastly delighted when the harness was put on him over his clothes. This was a change indeed! The toil, however, being severe, and the driver not too sparing of the lash, the poor wretch, the moment he was unyoked, fled for his life, harness and all, towards the city.

It was dusk ere he reached it, and the gates being closed, he was compelled to take refuge for the night in a cemetery outside the walls. Some early grave-diggers espied him next morning, and beholding this uncouth figure reposing on the ground, shrank away in terror, exclaiming, "It is a ghoul, which feeds on the carcases of the dead."

Xailoun started up and fled, pursued at a distance by the grave-diggers, who, waxing bolder as they were joined by the rabble, flung their shovels at him, vociferating, "Down with the ghoul!" The village curs yelping at his heels followed closely upon his tracks; but so uncouth was his figure, so incomprehensible to them in its grotesque habiliments, that their courage failed them; they kept at a safe distance.

The poor idiot naturally sought the shelter of his own house. He was beaten back from it by his violent spouse, who could not recognize her good-looking helpmate in so strange a guise. He was changed indeed!

Captured, unharnessed, found to be human, and identified as the fool of the village, he was delivered to his wife, who at length regretted the sternness of her tutelary discipline; she endeavoured, though vainly, to impress upon his obtuse intellect that the change she had urged upon him was a moral, and not a physical metamorphosis. Poor Xailoun could only comprehend that he had not succeeded, and attributed his failure to the difficulty the Deity must have experienced in hearing his prayers in such close vicinity to a crowded and vociferous city. So he
resolved this time to pray further off, and have the field clear for his own individual eloquence.

There are waste lands, desolate sites of former civilization, around most Eastern cities. To one of these spots, teeming with the ruins of ancient edifices, and shunned alike by the well-to-do, from some rumour of its being frequented by robbers, and by the poor from its being the supposed haunt of evil spirits, Xailoun betook himself, for he argued that no obstreperous rival in piety would out-pray him in that haunted city of the dead.

On a pile of stones there darted to and fro a bright-eyed lizard, one of that jerking species whose responsive noddings were regarded by the simpleton as affirmative replies to his confidential communications. He sought, as usual, for a quiet gossip with “his cousin,” but the lizard sheltered himself beneath the stones, and declined the colloquy. Indignant at this discourtesy, Xailoun resolved to unearth him, and vigorously tumbled aside the heavy carved blocks in his efforts to force an interview upon his contemptuous cousin.

After a quarter of an hour’s violent exertion, a square of black marble, with a ring attached to it, attracted his attention.

“Ha! ha! I have found your house at last!” he exclaimed, as he wrenched up the slab and perceived a flight of stairs; “I’m not to be baffled, I’ll pay you a visit and inspect your premises.” At the bottom of the vault, for such it was, he noticed several urns, the contents of which he dimly descried by the glimmer of light that streamed from the opening he had made. Having dipped his hand into one of these and brought out a handful of gold (a raetal which in his poor way of living he had never come across), he imagined that it was a peculiar kind of dry food which the provident lizard had stored away for future consumption; so holding it out in his hand, he cried, in a petulant tone, “Hark you, my cousin! if you won’t come and speak to me, I’ll walk off with your winter provender and give it to my ass.” No reply being vouchsafed, Xailoun carried his threat into execution.

When he showed Oitba the lizard’s food, he was welcomed and caressed; at her bidding he carried off two panniers-full of gold, and then stopped up the orifice he had made. Being a prudent woman, she made no display of her newly-acquired wealth: necessary comforts, and a new suit of clothes for her husband were her chief expenditure.

She no longer cared for his labouring for hire, but dispatched him upon sundry errands. He could recollect one or two commissions at a time, but all beyond these were either wholly blotted from his memory, or so transmuted that he would bring back articles whose names were indeed somewhat similar, but whose natures were wholly opposite.

He had been desired one day to purchase meat, rice, and peas; the two former commissions were duly performed; the third was of course, forgotten. “Go back,” said his wife, “and keep on repeating the word aloud lest you should forget it.” So Xailoun mumbled to himself, as he walked along, “Only peas, only peas.” An itinerant dealer in jewellery was exhibiting his wares in the market- place,
crying “Pearls! precious pearls!” The simpleton who, like most of his station, was very inquisitive, dipped his hand into the jewel-box, and, holding up the string of pearls, gazed with lack-lustre eyes upon them; then, fearful of forgetting his errand, he repeated aloud his formula, “Peas, only peas.”

At this stigma upon his wares (which were not of the first quality), the wrath of the pedlar was kindled; snatching the string from the witless talker, he gave him a sound buffet for an unintentional witticism which had provoked a peal of laughter from the bystanders.

“Why did you strike me? What ought I to have said?” cried the poor innocent, rubbing his bruised face, and connecting the incident with the only party who was accustomed to strike him; the dealer, however, regardless of his question, stalked onwards, still vociferating, “Pearls! precious pearls!”

“I suppose, then, pearls are what my wife meant me to purchase,” thought Xailoun; so he wended on his way imitating his late antagonist, as he cried, “Pearls! precious pearls!” Another cuff betided him as he was thrust aside by a busy trader, who thought he was mocking his own calling.

“What ought I to have said, then?” cried the humble penitent.

“Nonsense!” replied the trader, as he passed on his way.

So Xailoun walked on repeating, “Nonsense!”

Now it chanced that the corpse of a popular magistrate was being carried to the grave, amidst the loud encomiums of a throng of admiring acquaintances. The simpleton’s “Nonsense” was too apt a response to their exaggerated praises of the deceased not to provoke their indignation. Confused by the storm of abuse which greeted his involuntary sarcasm, he humbly inquired what he ought to have said? As the procession swept onwards, a faithful slave, who loved the dead one well, quietly murmured, “May Paradise receive him!” So he took this ejaculation as a reply to his question; for by this time the idiot had become utterly oblivious of the original message, and contented to adopt any suggested substitute. Hence he walked on, sighing like the mourner, and lugubriously repeating, “May Paradise receive him!” until he met a cart which contained the carcass of an ass. He stared stupidly at it, but did not allow its presence to disturb the repetition he had been enjoined. “May Paradise receive him!” he cried, at which words the bystanders, who attributed his speech to a deliberate mockery of religion, so mercilessly assailed him with stones, that he took to his heels, and found a temporary refuge in the house of his mother-in-law.

After this adventure, Oitba hardly liked to trust him on an errand. Compelled one day to quit home for an hour or two, Oitba ordered her silly spouse to rock the baby, and feed the sitting hen, tasks so easy, that even his poor wit could scarcely fail to accomplish them. The fowl soon began to scratch itself, a feat which excited the benevolent attention of our hero. “When my head itches, my wife combs it,” he reflected; so he resolved to save it trouble, and as the comb was not at hand, he scratched its poll with a nail. Not being expert, and the bird far from patient, he unluckily thrust the nail into its brain, and felt astonished at its
passive endurance of his rough handling. Just as he began to comprehend the loss of his hen, and was distracted when he thought of the cudgelling he was likely to endure, the baby commenced squalling, and the eggs began to chill. “Oh, dear! what shall I do now?” was his querulous complaint; “I must nurse the child like his mother to stop its squalling, and I must keep the eggs warm, or there will be no chickens.” With a puzzled expression he exposed his breast, and tried to give the babe suck, while he carefully balanced himself, as he squatted over the nest. At this juncture his wife returned.

“Let me in,” was her brief demand.

“I can’t, I am brooding and suckling,” was his curt rejoinder.

Xailoun’s position was not an easy one, and the baby evinced by the loudness of its cries that it disapproved of a male substitute for the maternal breast.

Its cries excited the irritability of the mother, who, dashing the door open, immediately noticed the unfortunate hen, the victim of Xailoun’s experimental beneficence.

“Who killed my hen?” she screamed.

“She died in combing,” was the apologetic response.

“And her eggs, you fool!”

“I am hatching them myself.”

At these words her wrath boiled over; the blow she gave him disturbed his balance, and he fell squash upon the eggs, daubing his nether garments all over with the yellow yolks. He bolted from the house to avoid the anticipated beating, and bore philosophically the ironical cheers and pointing digits of the mocking lads, who insinuated an even worse catastrophe than had befallen him.

“I know I am a fool, and must be changed,” was his sad comment upon this and many a like incident; “I must force Heaven by the urgency of my prayers to alter me.” So he cogitated for a while, and his prayers not having been answered either in the bustling city or the quiet suburbs, he arrived at a remarkable yet not illogical conclusion. “Heaven don’t hear me, because I am so far off: the believer is told to turn in a certain direction when he prays, of course to face Heaven; now, if I always walk in that direction I must get to Heaven at last.”

Congratulating himself upon a power of reasoning he had scarcely thought inherent in him (for he was a modest man), he duly placed himself in the prescribed position, and turning neither to the right nor to the left, marched straight onwards, regaining his track when compelled by insurmountable obstacles to deviate from his devout course, by a most elaborate compensatory system of lateral progression. His path at length led him into a forest, the trees of which induced a painful amount of calculation, since to one without a compass it was by no means easy to preserve to a nicety a prescribed route. So rigidly, however, did he abide by his rule, that even when he beheld a suspicious group of men, who were in fact robbers dividing their spoil, directly in front of him, he unhesitatingly, and to their astonishment (so solemn did he look), advanced
towards them; and being in ill-luck, just arrived among them as a military force sent to pursue the thieves overtook the band, and captured the captain and sundry of his companions. Of course Xailoun, who only stared at what was going on, was pounced upon by a soldier, who would probably have run away had any resistance been attempted. Once more then he failed in his efforts to become transformed by dint of prayer.

Fellow-sufferers are usually communicative; so when the captain of the gang cursed his ill-luck, in both losing his perilously-won booty and his wild liberty at the same moment, Xailoun in his turn lamented his lost chance of reaching heaven, and being there transmuted into something so utterly different that his wife would not recognize him.

“As to heaven,” said the ruffian, “I can’t indeed help you to find it: for, as I never hoped to steal anything from there, I never troubled myself to find its position; but as to transforming you, I can so change you that the Prophet himself would not recognize you. I should be a mere numskull if I knew not how to disguise myself!”

Of course the witless one availed himself of such enviable skill, and the upshot was, that the dark-looking robber (who was naturally pale) became the fair-complexioned Xailoun, and the simpleton (who, like most fools, was gifted with imitative powers) stalked about with savage dignity as the swarthy brigand. This was effected by some walnut-juice, and a complete change of clothes.

The next morning all were adjudged to die; but as the condemned unanimously deposed that the idiot had accidentally thrust himself among them, and had never shared in their misdeeds, the supposed innocent (that is to say, the cunning captain,) was set at large. As to our hero, he at first aped to perfection the swaggering bravado of a reckless villain; but when, to his bewilderment, led forth to execution, reassumed his wonted silliness of manner. Oitba saved him from a change that would have been final. She had heard of a simpleton having been captured with the thieves, and rightly divined that it was her husband; had scrutinized the luckless villains as they were led forth to die, and despite the swarthy hue, blackened eyebrows and beard of her deluded spouse, felt half convinced of his identity. His farewell address to his cousin, the lizard, whom he reproached for his blitheness when he was about to lose so near a relative, caused her immediate interference on his behalf; and once pointed out by her, there were hosts of witnesses who could testify to his well-known attributes. He was temporarily reprieved, and led before the Commander of the Faithful.

His prospect of death, the after-judgment, his previous heavenward journey, produced such a bewildering medley of ideas in the brain of the poor wretch, that, fancying he recognized in the gorgeously-apparelled Caliph the ruler of Heaven, he flung himself on his knees before him, crying at the pitch of his voice, “Change me, O Lord! change me so that my very wife may not know me.” The oddity of the salutation convulsed the whole court with laughter, and the good-humoured sovereign carried on the joke by promising to accede to his request.
Conducted to an apartment he was refreshed with food in which an opiate had been mingled, and, during the stupefaction which ensued, his rustic dress was removed and replaced by flowing garments of spotless white; wings of snowy plumage were affixed to his shoulders, and, being naturally good-looking, he made a passable angel or ministering spirit. Large looking-glasses, objects he had never yet beheld, reflected his person, and, being of a loving nature, and fancying himself in a world of spirits, he turned in all directions striving to embrace the images of himself. After vainly endeavouring to kiss his reflection, and chilling his nose in the attempt, he thus philosophized: “I know why their noses are so cold; they live above, and the higher one climbs the colder it is.”

This deduction delighted the Caliph, who had amused himself by watching his proceedings: he was soon tired of him, however, and left him to his domestics, who, in their turn, diverted themselves by converting the angel into a frightful Afrit. While he was asleep they stripped him, covered him with raw goat-skins, put horns on his head, and a horrible mask with eye-holes of flame-coloured glass on his face, so that every object appeared enveloped in an atmosphere of fire; then waking him roughly, they roared with laughter when they beheld his horrified antics as he again gazed upon his reflection. Screaming with terror, he burst like a maniac through the circle around him, rushed to where he had last seen the Caliph, and, lighting upon him, prostrated himself before him, crying, “O Lord, change me back to Xailoun.”

“Calm thyself, poor wretch, and sleep,” was the reply; “waking, thenceforth and for ever thou wilt be Xailoun the Silly.”

Oitba presented herself at the public audience of the next morning; she bore two purses of gold in her hand. “My husband, O Caliph, is a born fool, but good at heart. I have brought with me our little fortune to compensate any injury he may cause the State; release him, I pray you, and let it be understood henceforth, that he is not responsible for actions which want of intellect, not want of principle, may lead him to perpetrate.”

The Caliph, who preferred to increase rather than diminish the little store that was offered him, made some trifling present, which, being magnified by rumour, became so large a sum that Oitba ventured on the strength of it to enlarge her expenses in accordance with the treasure her husband had discovered. The stick was for ever laid aside, and the united pair passed their lives amidst every comfort, for the next few visits of Xailoun to his contemptuous cousin’s secret hoard, so increased their resources, that all necessity for self-denial ceased to be required. A slave was purchased by Oitba for the special purpose of controlling her husband’s folly, and his “Oitba forbids it,” served as a salutary check to the absurd vagaries in which he would otherwise have indulged. So he enjoyed his strangely acquired wealth in peace, and as age advanced proved less demonstrative in his peculiarities. He became too well satisfied with the lot of Xailoun to seek another change.