

JAMASP AND THE QUEEN OF THE SERPENTS

He is a stupid lout, and will never come to good. Handsome fools think themselves above work, but young Jamasp must either toil or starve. His stuck-up mother has, to my knowledge, now parted with every coin and nearly every trinket, from her absurd notion of cramming knowledge into that dolt's head. So much the better for me. Times are hard, and we must all look out for ourselves."

So spake the hard-working, hard-dealing, mother of certain wood-cutters, whose circumstances were more flourishing than their reputation. Without the least unfriendly feeling towards her neighbour (the feeble-minded relict of one of the most famous sages of the East), the wood-dealer had watched her once envied play-fellow's gradual decline in fortune with placid complacency. In childhood there had been little difference in social position between the two females; but a Hindoo philosopher, in his scornful disregard of all worldly notions, had deliberately preferred the prettier but weaker-minded of the two, to a more nobly-born wife, believing in his simplicity that an ignorant and dowerless maiden would cherish and venerate him, whereas, should he wed her superiors, they would neglect him in their love of display and luxurious indolence. Whether right or wrong in his estimate of the higher class, the sage erred greatly as to the anticipated humility of his peasant-bride: however much he might be revered abroad, in his own house he was slighted and sneered at, because his gains and income were not commensurate with the baseless expectations of her who had pardoned his pedantry for the sake of his property.

Not long after his marriage he had died, not worn out by his studies, — for he had been so abstemious that the inaction of his body had not proved injurious to his health, — but in the prime of his life, a victim to that Indian scourge, the cholera. Either nature or his skill in medicine had enabled him at the time to battle successfully against the attack, so that he recovered, to all appearance, and again resumed his wonted pursuits; but he felt that the pestilence, though forcibly ejected, had, during its brief mastery, withered his vital organs, and that his shattered constitution did not retain sufficient vitality to resist the ordinary wear and tear of life. Had it not been for his expected paternity, he would not have been reluctant to die, for after his marriage he had become melancholy and misanthropical, declaimed against the possibility and even the right-fulness of being happy, and often repeated the world-old adage, that "all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

His last act, like most of his usual doings, was more philosophical than wise. Instead of selling to some younger enthusiast or ardent tyro in science those precious manuscripts, for the acquisition of which he had devoted all which the frugality of his father had bequeathed him, he cast them with his own hands far

into the ocean, and smiled sadly as he saw them sink into its abysses. It might be he was unwilling that other sages should profit by their perusal and rival his far-spread fame; yet, possibly, he had noticed that the ignorant and thoughtless practically enjoy life more than the learned, and sullenly immolated the seductive causes of his wasted existence. Previous to their destruction, however, he sedulously condensed the concentrated essence of all his knowledge, and inscribed it upon five slips of papyrus, which latter having inclosed in a simple casket of cedar, he intrusted to his wife as the sole yet all-sufficient heritage of their unborn baby. Then, having conscientiously discharged what he deemed his duty, he betook himself to his bed, and, with scarcely a sigh, tranquilly resigned his harmless if useless existence.

So quickly after his decease did Jamasp, for so was the posthumous child of the sage designated, come into the world, that the soul of the gentle father might almost be supposed to have passed into the body of the tender babe. In its features were shadowed forth all the pure-minded simplicity and noble benevolence of the self-denying parent; as it grew up there was an exalted spirituality in the aspect of the child which forcibly reminded one of the unspoken yearning of its sire (who, remember, was a Hindoo and a heathen) to be absorbed in the Divinity, but there the resemblance ceased: the boy showed no trace of ancestral intellect; the lad, as he grew in stature, became strong, active, and handsome. The vigour of his body, the weakness of his mind seemed alike to have been inherited from his peasant mother.

About a score of years had elapsed from the decease of the Indian sage to the opening of our tale, during which period his impoverished widow had parted with every saleable article that the frugality of her husband had accumulated. Of course she now lamented him, and reproached herself with her neglectful depreciation of his merits. But this is too common an occurrence to deserve mention. What is more to the purpose, she resolved to impart her worldly troubles to her quondam playmate and present neighbour, the now thriving woodseller, a shrewd, notable woman, whom, at her sudden rise in life, she had at first contemptuously looked down upon, and subsequently treated with condescending familiarity, proffering her unasked advice with the authority of one who had achieved distinction by her own unaided merits. Times had changed; the gently dictatorial adviser had now recourse for counsel to the humble trader, not from any great confidence in its efficacy, but from that craving for sympathy which so strongly influences the female mind. Moreover, like most weak-minded persons, she had a tolerable idea as to what her conduct ought to be, yet had not the moral courage to carry out her notions without the sanctioning approval of her gossips.

It is pleasant to the ignoble and little-minded to utter bitter truths with impunity, to those who were once their superiors in station or in fortunes it is likewise agreeable to the same widely-diffused class to actually profit by the misfortunes of their friends. This the trader managed to effect; for having first brusquely pointed out the utter incapacity of Jamasp to earn his living as a trader

without capital, and indicated his brawny frame as a special evidence, that Providence had designed him for severe manual toil, she finally offered that her sons should instruct him in the not very difficult art of wood-cutting, and should teach him to thread the intricacies of the forest, selecting the likeliest spots, provided that the widow could manage to buy him an axe, an ass, and suitable panniers, and that the young man would agree to sell her the product of his labours at one-half of the price she vended the wood at. The bargain was accepted; the last trinket was parted with to purchase the required articles; and the greedy trader, having at last succeeded in persuading her uncouth sons to permit the young man to work in their company, commented upon the transaction as in our first paragraph.

Their compliance with her wishes was far from a ready one; for the gain would be their mother's, not their own; and there is a trade jealousy of interlopers even among the rudest mechanics. They had secrets of their own, too, to hide; assuredly their clothing, habits, and style of living were far more expensive than could have been honestly derived from their scanty earnings; for the now thriving woodseller was not too liberal a paymaster, even to her own children.

However, they sullenly assented, and Jamasp, now permitted to accompany them to the hill-country, proved so active, vigorous, and industrious, that in a short time his earnings, ill-remunerated as he was, actually exceeded their own, and he and his mother were enabled to live in comparative comfort. His comrades soon found that his inaptness for book-learning was not the result of mental incapacity, but merely the revolt of his intellect against the forcing process, by which the widow had essayed to drive wisdom into his hard-worked brain. She had positively benumbed his mental faculties, which were at least of the average capacity, by the very intensity of her endeavours to fill him with wisdom. She doted upon her child, her only one, the youthful image of his lost father, (whom, now that his idiosyncrasies could no longer clash with her own whims and prejudices, she profoundly loved, firmly believing, moreover, that she had always done so,) and stubbornly resolved to make her boy as wise, and consequently as good (for so she argued), as his lamented sire.

Of course she had his horoscope drawn by the best astrologer in the neighbourhood, who prognosticated all happiness to him, if he could only get over the terrible crisis which an awful conjunction of planets threatened him with on his attaining to manhood.

"His would be no common career," said the oracle; "his success or failure in life no long and arduous struggle for mere competence, but a desperate contest with fortune, to be quickly terminated, whether its result should be good or evil."

"But *how* will it end?" inquired the impatient widow, interrupting the sapient soothsayer.

"All things are not revealed to us," he replied; "Providence, in its mercy, hides much future sorrow from us, lest we should grieve too much beforehand at the inevitable."

“Yet tell me, I implore you,” she continued, “whether, and by what means, his deadly peril may be averted?”

“Wisdom alone can avert a threatened evil,” was the sententious reply of the retreating professional, who having received his fee, was by no means anxious to prolong the interview.

So the widow, who interpreted this apophthegm literally, and conceived that her offspring might by intense and continual study arrive at such a pitch of wisdom as to baffle adverse fate in the terrible ordeal he was destined to encounter, resolved that no pains or cost should be spared, on her part, to arm her darling against this fearful prognostication. Poor boy! he was so incessantly afflicted with endless lessons (more particularly in theology, a very common yet not very fascinating study for children), that nothing but the vigour of his maternal constitution, and the dwindling means of his surviving parent, saved his body from premature decay. As it was, the cramming system exhibited its usual effect upon the precocious; his expression eventually assumed such a fixed aspect of puzzled stolidity, that the more skilled artisans refused to instruct him in their trades, asserting that he had not wit enough to master the difficulties of their craft.

So the poor widow lamented, and would have despaired of the future of her boy, had not the astrologer whom she had consulted and believed, so egregiously erred in one or two of his predictions — “the effect of a slight miscalculation,” he apologetically asserted, “where his remuneration had not been sufficient to ensure his adequate attention,” that the fond mother took courage, and wisely resolved to leave all to Providence. Had she arrived at this conclusion earlier, it would have been better for Jamasp: late as it was, his brain had time for repose, and he was now rather a fool by past reputation than in sober reality.

His new occupation forced him to employ his latent powers of observation and of judgment; for fitting trees grew not in every spot, and he was conscious, that if once lost amidst the ravines of the stupendous mountains, from whose soaring peaks he reaped his perilous profits (felling many a pine that slanted over a fathomless abyss), he must indubitably perish from hunger or wild beasts. Hence he busied himself in learning all that nature and the practical experience of his rough companions could teach him; so that ere long he had become an expert wood-ranger, with a hardy and healthy body, and a mind which having lain fallow for an adequate period, and then become invigorated by moderate and judicious exercise, had now finally asserted its natural energies.

His rude mates, who daily witnessed his feats of skill and daring, no longer despised him; and as sooner or later he must perforce detect their illegal proceedings, resolved to make him a participator in them. So one day, when all had been driven by a violent storm to take shelter in the same cavern, they offered him a share in their secret enterprises, which they assured him were far more profitable than their ostensible drudgery.

“We are not,” they said, “banditti. We never plunder our neighbours, but if

knaveish merchants *will* cross our wild frontiers, to take the bread from hard-working crafts-men by selling their foreign goods cheaper than they can be made in our native land, why, they deserve to lose both lives and merchandise. Not that we ever kill anybody: only we so manage that a stray mule or camel should occasionally drop its burden, or fall over a precipice.”

Jamasp was one of those simple-minded men who can neither perceive the difference (so far as regards the moral principle) between robbing a fellow-countryman, and plundering a stranger, nor comprehend the essential distinction between depriving a man of his own by fraud, or taking it from him by force. So not being experienced in the world, he did not content himself with declining their well-meant offer, but roundly rebuked them for their roguery.

This indignant and, according to their notions, ungrateful reception of a proposal which had been offered with rough good-humour as a boon and a compliment, irritated the three brothers, who felt themselves aggrieved and insulted by the blunt plainness of the epithets he had applied to their marauding. But they nursed their wrath in silence, and only evidenced it by refraining from further converse with their squeamish monitor.

The mouldering ashes of a fire (which had been lighted when first they took shelter), by whose friendly blaze they had dried their saturated garments and cooked their homely food, now diffused a grateful warmth. The three unwitting robbers crouched over it, for the air was chilly in those elevated regions; but our hero repelled by their gloomy taciturnity, and discerning that in their present mood his company was no longer agreeable to them, retired further into the recesses of the cave, and throwing himself upon the dry sand, in one of the innermost nooks, listlessly scooped up the soil that lay beneath his hand, as he moodily pondered upon the revelations of that morning. He was scarcely conscious of his occupation, until his thoughts were aroused from their dreamy reverie by a slight blow experienced by his fingers, as they struck against an upright ring of brass firmly soldered to a convex plate of metal. He started to his feet, and tugged vainly at the ring: then in the spirit of good fellowship, hoping, moreover, that his unselfish frankness would dispel any angry feeling which might rankle in the hearts of his companions, he briefly communicated his discovery to them; and they, elated by his tidings, eagerly assisted him in clearing away the mass of sand which had buried the shield-like lid of a capacious cistern. Was it only a well — or was it a treasure-chamber? Neither: the ponderous cover being hurriedly torn up, its removal disclosed to their expectant eyes a vast reservoir of virgin honey.

Even when roughly estimated at one-half its market price, such being the probable reduction at which alone the pious dealers would have purchased it in bulk, the value of the enormous store of honey, and of its huge copper covering, would be a little fortune to the four peasants. So, exulting in the anticipated profits of their short day's work, they returned without delay (for the storm had now subsided) to their several homes; and having provided themselves with jars,

buckets, and other appliances for removing and storing up the savoury liquid, they started next morning for the scene of their labours, with every ass, mule, or horse they could hire or borrow. So vast was the hoard of luscious food, so distant was the cave from the town they dwelt in, that, although they worked strenuously and unremittingly, they could not quite empty the pit in one day. As from the first they had agreed to keep the discovery secret, even from their nearest relatives, until, at least, the honey had been sold and the proceeds shared, the widow had no inkling of the good fortune which had betided her son.

Next morning, almost before the sun had risen, the party again visited the nearly exhausted reservoir; but the hearts of the three brethren were evilly disposed towards their more scrupulous mate. Suspicion had already been engendered by the unqualified refusal of Jamasp to join in their depredations; now fear and covetousness supervening, urged them still further in the path of crime.

“I suppose,” whispered the youngest, who had contrived that the widow’s son should head the little caravan, whilst he and his kinsmen brought up the rear, “that our gentleman comrade will claim one-half of our honey because he chanced to find it, and threaten to expose our patriotic amusements” — and he smiled grimly as he termed them so, — “to the authorities, if we don’t submit to his extortion.”

“Nobody would miss him. He has no friends but his mother and *ourselves*,” replied the second, glancing furtively at the louring faces of his brothers, and encouraged by their relentless physiognomy; “tigers are numerous in these parts.”

“No violence!” said the eldest approvingly. “Never shed blood unnecessarily. The pit is very deep, and quite perpendicular.”

So they managed that Jamasp should be last in the emptied cistern, and then sneaking away without even indulging in a farewell taunt, conscientiously quitted the cavern without slaying him, and returned to their distant home, where they sold their acquisitions to such advantage that straightway they became small capitalists and thriving traders. Success made them moral men (at least in seeming), for they soon found that the daily gains of cheating and extortion tacitly submitted to by society, and regarded as incidental to their calling, were not only safer, but far more profitable than occasional brigandage. As for the bereaved widow, she wept for the loss of her foredoomed son, who dying by the fangs of a savage beast (for so had it been reported) in his early manhood, had thus fulfilled the prophecy of the astrologer.

Let us now return to the deserted victim.

What shouts he raised for rescue, what mingled prayers and reproaches he uttered, what almost superhuman yet futile efforts he made to scale the smooth and upright walls of his prison-house, may rather be imagined than depicted. He had been let down by a rope, which still dangled from the brink. In vain he seized it; it was loose, and fell inwards as he pulled it; he formed a loop at its extremity, and violently cast it in all directions, hoping that it might possibly catch some

jutting projection of the rock which would support his weight: the cord was too short, however, to reach the rugged sides of the cavern. Convinced, after many efforts at climbing, of the hopelessness of struggling further against fate, for the polished sides of the stone reservoir afforded him no foothold, he finally prostrated himself in prayer, resigning himself to the will of the Almighty. From this posture he was aroused by the sensation of something crawling upon his hand; he shuddered as he beheld a large black venomous scorpion, and instinctively jerked it from his person, and trampled it to death. This incident saved his life; it caused him to reflect. How could the insect have crawled upon him? Had it fallen from above, the sound of its descent (so still was all around him) would have attracted his attention. There must be some other mode of entrance, or the creature could not so noiselessly have crept upon him unawares.

Then, once more having gazed anxiously above, beneath, and around him, he perceived, on a level with his shoulder, a narrow orifice, from which the scorpion had evidently emerged. There might be more within. Well, what mattered it? There was a possibility of escape. Death in any shape was preferable to the otherwise inevitable agony of slow starvation. He thrust, then, his knife into the dark chink, and to his joy found that the seemingly solid rock crumbled beneath its blade; then he introduced his hand, and tore out a large piece of cement, and soon light poured in freely from the rapidly enlarged cavity. By strenuous exertions he made the opening sufficiently large to enter, and then having stood upon the little mound of rubbish which he had scooped out, and thus raised himself to a fitting level, he leaped as it were into the hole, and after a brief yet painful contest with the falling earth, found himself in safety on the other side.

The prospect now before him was scarcely reassuring: it seemed to threaten the same doom which he had so lately exulted in having avoided; only his prison was more capacious. It was midday, and the light which streamed down perpendicularly from above showed him that he was standing in a narrow gully, between two abruptly precipitous walls of rock. The mountain, by some volcanic agency, had been rift asunder; and the almost touching cliffs seemed to heighten in the distance. Still there was hope, for some devious torrent might have forced a rude yet practicable passage to the summit.

The youth then advanced rapidly along the smooth and sandy pathway, which, sloping downwards for many a mile, still presented the same monotonous aspect. Far up he could faintly descry gleaming veins of virgin gold meandering in profusion along the white crystalline rock, which, though stained here and there with rusty deposits from minute rills, was everywhere solid as adamant. As he gazed for an instant upon the intense azure of the sky above, and the boundless sheet of snowy quartz which stretched as far as his eye could reach, the latent poetry of his soul was roused; he became conscious of the mingled awfulness and beauty of the scene before him; he comprehended the stern mercilessness of smiling Nature.

Then, as he still advanced, the character of the strata changed. The path

became soft and pasty, the walls more grey and opaque; no longer shining, they only gleamed faintly as the now slanting sun-light was reflected from them. Here and there cropped out rich green masses, which sparkled more brightly than the mica-slate in which they were imbedded. One of these, washed from its matrix by the storms of centuries, lay on the hitherto untrodden path. Instinctively attracted by its glitter and bright hue, Jamasp almost unconsciously stooped down and picked up the fallen mineral: it was a group of emeralds, whose clustered cubes, though perceptibly flawed by their fall, would have adorned a prince's diadem. The acquisition of this prize quickened his love of life, and acted as a stimulus to his flagging strength. Life seems much more precious, because more enjoyable, in the rich than in the poor; and now Jamasp had that in his possession which would ensure him competence, if not wealth. So, though weary and somewhat hungry, he manfully trudged on with reanimated spirit.

Would the mountain range go on for ever, or would he at length behold the walls diminishing in altitude, until a plain appeared? Eventually it must be so, he argued, but when? Would his strength hold out until food and freedom could be obtained, or were his bones destined to rot upon the now oozy soil? For although no sound of falling waters disturbed the solemn silence, and no mould or clay was visible overhead (daylight was fast fading); the pathway grew more and more muddy, and his feet occasionally plashed in slimy pools as he wearily staggered onwards. The water grew deeper at every step. It was already up to his knees; should he advance? There was little choice. Behind was certain destruction, in front the possibility of tracing from whence the waters had descended, and perchance of ascending in their channel. Again the stream grew wider and deeper, the bottom more and more slippery. His progress became slower. The liquid had nearly reached his lips; he quaffed it, felt refreshed, and betook himself to swimming. No longer did he gaze upon the menacing walls of his prison; he stubbornly breasted the opposing stream. Soon, however, he became faint with weariness, and his ineffective strokes became more and more feeble.

What warm and spicy breath is that which fans his cheek? Has he unconsciously passed the icy gates of death, and entered Paradise? His aching limbs told him how vain was that imagination, but his awakened eyes told him likewise that he was rescued from immediate peril. In the lethargy of despair he had arrived, without seeing it beforehand, at a sudden gap in the hill from which a low-based, crater-shaped mountain lake, when surcharged with rain, poured its surplus water into the rift he had been traversing. A ledge, not a foot from the level of the stream, ran continuously round the lake, and to this haven of shelter from a watery death did Jamasp cling, and with a last effort threw his exhausted frame upon its hard surface. What blissful ease was the voluntary torpidity which followed! But darkness was approaching; so, after a brief rest, he again roused himself to fresh struggles for his existence.

Not more than a mile from where he had entered the hollow circuit, he perceived, at an oblique angle from the ledge, a clean smooth road, that gradually

wound upwards; following which he found himself upon a broad platform, which, jutting forth high above the lake, exhibited at one glance its entire dimensions. The panorama around was very beautiful, and unexpected as it was lovely. Rich masses of vegetation, contrary to the usual habits of nature, surrounded the waveless surface, clinging vines — at least, they seemed so in the gloomy obscurity of the evening — trailed on every rock.

The wearied adventurer, leaving the smooth plateau, clambered towards the grapes; he had nearly plucked a large and tempting bunch, when he recoiled in horror from the slough of a gigantic boa, and a loud and angry hissing from an adjacent brake drove him shuddering from the spot. He knew all now. The jewels, the snake, even the dark spots, which had seemed to flit like far-off birds across the narrow strip of sky above the mountain-rift, were now comprehensible to him. He was in, or near, the celebrated valley of jewels, which no man had dared to enter from terror of its serpent guardians!

Quickly retracing his steps, he retreated to the central platform, and having noticed a ring of seat-like elevations, with a raised rocky couch pre-eminently conspicuous in the middle, flung himself recklessly upon it, and, worn out with incessant fatigue, soon became oblivious of all things. Fear itself had yielded to overpowering weariness.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, and the warm sun was pouring its bright beams upon the landscape, disclosing a sight so startling, that his appalled senses almost relapsed into the lethargy from which they had just been freed. Far as his eye could reach, the ground in the distance undulated with moving snakes; yet none molested him, none menaced him, none approached him. Reposing in vast coils upon the circle of seats of which his own rocky couch was the centre, lay extended in calm majesty a score or so of mighty Pythons, serpents of such magnitude, that the boas which he had encountered in his forest rambles seemed but earthworms in comparison. No hissing sound was audible, but the rustling of the gliding reptiles, as they marshalled themselves between the raised seats, was like the wind whispering to the autumn leaves. The dense mass of deadly creatures hemmed him in on every side, but none ventured to intrude within the apparently charmed circle.

There is a calmness of despair that enables us to notice objects which, were our terror less intense, were our hope of life more assured, would probably escape our cognizance. The knolls, which in the gloom of the evening he had regarded as mere turf-covered rocks, now flashed brilliantly in the sunshine from the uncut crystals of a thousand gems; their very groundwork was composed of tree-like masses of native gold. His own couch was a solid pile of diamonds and of emeralds.

For a while (to him it seemed an age, yet it was only a few minutes) the hideous array glared at him with lurid eyes, yet refrained from assaulting him. Then a colossal boa, with slow and stately march, glided through their yielding ranks, bearing upon his broad back a monstrous pearl shell (the gift of some

tributary sea-snake) on which reposed, in calm dignity, the loveliest of painted serpents. Its scales of pure and silvery white reflected prismatic colours, as the sunbeams danced upon them; its long and gracefully tapering body was crowned by the diminutive head of a lovely maiden, whose lofty brow was surmounted by a coronet of priceless rubies, the symbol of her rank. In dulcet tones she thus addressed the unconscious invader of her territory, the unwitting usurper of her throne: —

“None shall hurt thee here, bold intruder though thou art; for I am Queen of the Serpents. Thou hast sought sanctuary in the very temple of our power, and I will not violate the sacred law of hospitality. Bear witness, all my people, that I receive this wanderer as my guest, and harm him not if you value your existence.”

At this kind speech, evidently comprehensible to her mute subjects, Jamasp vacated the royal seat, and prostrated himself in humble gratitude. The Queen bade her attendants to provide him with a repast of freshly-plucked fruits, and even condescended to partake along with him of the grapes, pomegranates, bananas, pistachios, etc., which were brought them. After which, having dismissed her martial retinue, she courteously inquired of the wanderer his past history, and being gratified by its recital, vouchsafed in her turn to amuse him with an adventure of her own.

The Tomb of Solomon

“Potent though I am,” said she, “and surrounded by warriors whose weapons are more fatal than any forged by man; ruler though I am, not alone of the reptiles, but of the beasts of the earth and the fishes of the sea, — for should they oppose me, my subjects would slay them with their poison-fangs, — I have felt the bitterness of captivity: I have been at the mercy of a child of Adam. It happened thuswise: —

“A young Indian prince, Belukia by name, having descried in the treasure-chamber of his deceased father a small cabinet supported on a column of Egyptian marble, opened it from curiosity, and found its sole contents to be a casket of carved ebony, which enclosed a roll of papyrus. Being of a studious temperament, he carefully perused the manuscript, and soon felt strangely interested in its contents. It was a theological treatise in direct opposition to that creed in which he had been educated, and had been written for the sole use of priests and rulers: to all others it was forbidden. It demonstrated the unity of the Deity worshipped under a hundred names by the unspiritual masses, who, indeed, adored his several attributes as distinct individualities. It prophesied, too, the early coming of a heavenly Being, who should subdue all men by his goodness, and purge their souls from earthly passions.

“Had not his heart been pure and noble, these heretical doctrines (for they were such to his nation) would have been scornfully rejected and despised. To him, however, they proved so acceptable, so enthralling, that he made a solemn vow to seek for the godlike being who was to purify mankind, even should he wander to the most distant regions of the earth.

“Full of zeal, enamoured with doctrines which alone fulfilled his inner consciousness of what was right, he resigned the administration of his kingdom to the sage and trusty vizier of his late father, and having bidden farewell to his surviving parent, started for Jerusalem; for it was there, so far as he could gather from the hazy prophecy, that the pre-ordained One would be heard of, or beheld.

“The journey was long and perilous; many moons waned ere he reached the land he sought; and there, all being contented with their own superstitions, none either knew of or cared for (though all expected) the long- prophesied emanation of Divinity. Chance, however, threw him in the way of Offan, a sage who had vainly devoted his life to the pursuit of the more abstruse sciences. The daring spirit of that student would have rendered him worthy to contest the mastery of the universe with those mysterious beings who are the pre-ordained guardians of the course of nature; but his soul, though courageous, was grovelling; he craved supernatural power, not for the glorious privilege it confers of redressing the wrongs of fortune towards others, but solely for the acquisition of sensual enjoyment for himself. He listened with a smile to the artless narrative of the simple prince, who, for a visionary project, from which no gain could accrue to himself individually, had abandoned the delights of ease, pleasure, and almost absolute power, for the many privations of lengthened travel; and gleaned from his conversation the one all-important fact, that I, the Queen of the Serpents, who alone knew the hidden virtues of all plants, held empire in the regions that bordered upon his own, and often, indeed, approached the very frontiers.

“I will for once be frank,’ said Offan: ‘our interests do not clash, and companionship will prove agreeable to both of us. *My* objects once attained, and I own they are illimitable knowledge and power, I promise to devote all my then boundless resources to trace out the mysterious being you yearn for; and rest assured, that if he be now upon the earth, I shall enforce his presence. For my books have taught me the precise spot where Solomon, lord of man and spirits, the ring upon whose linger confers universal dominion upon its wearer, still reposes in unburied majesty, lifelike yet inanimate. So remote from the ordinary route of commerce is the islet to which he was borne, that no ship has ever visited it, even accidentally; such sunken rocks and coral reefs surround it, that no vessel could approach its shores without destruction. There is but one way to succeed; our feet must be anointed with the juice of a marvellous plant known only to the Queen of the Serpents, which will enable us to tread upon the waters as upon dry ground. This secret, and even the exact situation of the fatal islet, I have long known, but until this day I knew not the abode of the Snake Queen. Let us, then, hasten to capture her, and permit her to ransom herself cheaply by finding us the

herb we are seeking.'

"The Belooch Prince readily assented, and in due time both adventurers arrived in my dominions. They were bold, yet wary; and the more noble of the two knew well the weaknesses of my race, and my own familiar haunts.

"Milk, being usually unattainable, proves an irresistible attraction to us, and a very small bowl of it tempted me to the mouth of the cave within which the daring couple had secreted themselves. I lapped it eagerly, and then tried, and almost equally liked, the contents of a larger bowl which lay beside it, full to the brim with a sweet and very potent wine. This beverage so intoxicated me, that I lay benumbed and innocuous before my captors, who having watched my proceedings from their asylum, took advantage of my helplessness, placed me in a cage, and waited anxiously for my recovery.

"Fear not,' said the Prince courteously, when I had at length shaken off the poisonous lethargy; 'we will not harm you: all we require is that you will point out to us the water-repelling plant which will enable our feet to tread the ocean waves without sinking beneath them. Merely indicate that to us, and immediate freedom shall reward your compliance. Forgive my unavoidable roughness, and let there be peace between us.'

"Although naturally indignant at my capture, I assented to these terms, and was soon liberated; for the herb, however uncommon it may be elsewhere, is indigenous to this country, and by no means scarce.

"My subjects, and the fish and fowl, who submissively act as my spies and emissaries, have furnished me with the sequel to my own misadventure. Offan, and the Prince, having expressed the juice of a few plants, and enshrined the liquid in a golden phial, proceeded to the sea-coast, and there, having anointed their feet, traversed the waste of waters until they arrived at the islet of Solomon.

"The land, if it might be so called, was a mere gigantic rock, lashed by perpetual waves and utterly destitute of vegetation. It yielded nothing that would induce the adventurous mariner, who should by any possible contingency have safely crossed the foaming line of breakers which girded it, to linger for a moment; it produced nothing that could sustain life in the unhappy wretch whose tempest-tossed vessel might have been shattered upon the guardian reef. The wisest of mankind had evidently selected it as the most inaccessible spot upon earth, the safest repository for his treasures, the most impregnable of mausoleums, a sepulchre more secure than the solid pyramids of Egypt.

"After aiding each other in a painful ascent of the rugged cliffs, the resolute travellers at length scrambled to the summit, which they found perforated in all directions by precisely similar caverns, whose sinuous windings would have wearied the patience of any casual explorer. The long studies of the sage here enabled him to overcome the extreme difficulty of resolving which to enter; had chance decided his footsteps, weeks might have elapsed ere the sepulchre of the King could have been discovered, and death by famine would have been the inevitable lot of the searchers for his tomb. Offan, however, did not hesitate for a

moment. Observing in the far interior of one of them a faint glimmer of light succeeding to the darkness in which all the hollows alike were enveloped, he impetuously led the way, and, blindly rushing through the murky portion of the cavern, after a brief space of time beheld a sight that fully recompensed him for all the previous hardships he had endured. Royally apparelled and seated upon a throne of flashing diamonds, from whose collective light-secreting powers proceeded the pale lamp-like illumination that rendered the whole scene dimly visible, a majestic form of more than ordinary stature, whose stern features bore the impress of command, seemed, from afar, instinct with life and power. But the orbits were devoid of eyes; there only had the flesh-preserving skill of the mummy-artist failed to preserve the semblance of vitality. The wondrous ring, blazing, with innate light, upon the bent emaciated finger, which seemed retentive of authority even after death, Offan would have torn, without reverence, from the stiffened hand; but ere he could touch the corpse, there glided suddenly from beneath the throne a spectral snake, the guardian genius of the deceased monarch, which, interposing its threatening form between the living and the dead, by the suddenness of its contiguity caused the sacrilegious adventurer to instinctively recoil.

“Back, daring mortals!’ for by this time the Prince had overtaken his companion; ‘fate has not destined either of you to wield the sceptre of Solomon. The allotted time has not yet come when I shall be free and, until then, I must needs immolate all who shall resist my warning. Retire at once. I have no pleasure in slaying, no love for the dead; but I am doomed to watch over the carcass of him whom in life I feared and hated.’

“Thus spoke the once rebellious genius, who had struggled of old for that liberty which was still withheld from him as an enduring punishment for his stubborn opposition.

“The Belooch Prince submissively retired; for the scorching fire now issuing from the jaws of the monster, which swelled each moment into vaster proportions, and the angry glitter of its baleful eyes convinced him of the inutility of a contest with a superhuman adversary. Not so did Orfan; muttering an impotent charm, he leaped boldly forward, in the vain hope of clutching the ring before he should be overpowered by its vigilant guardian: once in his own hand, dissevered from the corpse, and he would become lord of spirits and master of life. What cared he for a momentary scorching? it could be cured in a like moment by the virtues of the ring. But so instantaneously searching was the lightning-like flame which gushed from the throat of his snake-shaped foe, that all power of movement ceased within him; the flesh fumed as it were from his calcined bones, and he withered in a moment to a shapeless mass.

“Alas! for the ambitious voluptuary. But Belukia, after much suffering, returned to the kingdom of his fathers, baffled, indeed, in his immediate project (a wild yet noble one), but improved by an experience of life’s troubles. Henceforth he could sympathize with the unfortunate and the adventurous; too frequently

they are identical.”

The Snake Queen paused, and having indicated a neighbouring grotto as the residence of her guest, and appointed for him a guard of honour which should attend to his requirements, retired to her subterranean palace. There was no lack of refreshing fruits and luscious honey: the lake furnished him with beverage, his attendants were assiduous, and his dwelling-place (the climate being perfection) far from disagreeable. The Queen, moreover, was a pleasant gossip, and the days of Jamasp sped happily and quickly.

But trouble was at hand. She loved him, and ere long boldly avowed she had spared him for his beauty, that he might be the partner of her throne. “Else had he, the unwitting intruder upon her dominions, shared the fate of all other mortals who had ventured into her fastnesses. Belukia and his comrade had alone escaped with impunity.”

There is some occult horror of the reptile world implanted in the breast of man; and though the human head of the Snake Queen was exquisitely beautiful, and her voice loving, soft, and gentle, the idea of passing his existence with so unnatural a bride was inexpressibly repulsive to our hero. However, lest he should be thought ungrateful, he concealed his disgust, and, as he could not escape from his dangerous hostess, urgently pressed the Queen for permission to revisit his native town previous to their nuptials, that he might relieve the anxiety of his widowed mother, and provide for her necessities by the sale of his emeralds. Yielding a reluctant assent to his importunities, for thoroughly enamoured she could refuse him nothing, he was furnished with a guide, and after a few days’ journey found himself once more near the scenes of his boyhood.

Before he left he was taught by his fond gaoler a low whistling sound like the whispering of a wanton zephyr, which, when uttered in the honey-cave, would summon her to his side, to guard him from any of her irritable subjects whom he might inadvertently tread on when returning to the borders of the mountain-lake. During his sojourn in the land of the serpents, he had daily immersed himself in the limpid waters of that stream; and the ardent Queen having noticed how much he delighted in this health-giving purification, to expedite his coming back to her, made him swear never to bathe again until his return to her dominions. He took the oath willingly and promptly, for he preferred an eternal abstinence from the pleasures of the bath to sharing the couch of the woman-headed snake.

“Keep your plighted word, dear one,” she had cried on parting, when, having coiled herself gently around him, she had kissed him with her lovely but icy lips; “I feel a presentiment that my very life will depend upon your truthfulness.”

And so they parted; she gliding back to her now desolate palace (for what was sovereignty to her without his gladdening presence?), soon to keep an unremitting watch around the honey-cave; he stepping briskly and blithely on his homeward route, rejoicing to quit for ever one for whom he felt simultaneously a conflicting gratitude and aversion.

Jamasp was received by his mother as one risen from the dead. She fainted in his arms, and when recovered from her trance wept and laughed alternately, with uncontrollable emotion. When she had become more composed he narrated his strange adventures; and she, woman-like, after hearing of the base treachery of the woodcutters, hastened to upbraid them for their villainy, and threatened to publicly accuse them of their past misdeeds. They were now flourishing traders, with reputations that could not bear aspersion; so propitiating her immediate wrath by a timely gift of money, they dismissed her for the night, and took counsel together as to how best they might avoid exposure. Next morning they sought the poor abode of their late comrade, and having freely bestowed upon him one half of their wealth (which successful commerce would soon replace), asked and obtained his silence and his pardon.

Then Jamasp, having sold his emeralds for a large sum of money, became a rich merchant, and was no longer esteemed a fool, but a clever fellow. His sense and prosperity were universally attributed to his having perused the brief compendium of all philosophy, which had been bequeathed him as his sole inheritance; but in truth, when the casket had been opened, the precious papyri contained only moral apophthegms, denouncing the vanity of all corporeal pleasures, and suggesting an eternal contemplation of the perfection of the Divinity, with the hope of being eventually absorbed in His essence, as the height of human felicity. Jamasp was too young, too capable of earthly enjoyment, to accept with docility this supreme philosophy.

His friends, for he had now many, questioned him as to the cause of his long absence, and his strange repugnance to bathe along with them. He frankly told them all, except, of course, his abandonment in the pit, and the treasures he had perceived in the valley of jewels. They, on their part, joked him about his serpent bride, and laughed at his scrupulous observance of an oath which had been unfairly exacted as the price of his freedom. But they could not induce him to violate it, despite of his own great longing for a salutary gratification. One day, however, the proprietor of a bath, who was his personal acquaintance, having asked him to enter the building for a friendly chat, invited him to accept of a bath as a token of his regard, but was answered as usual by the story of his enforced vow. The customers, not a few of whom were his daily associates, were in a merry mood; so flocking round him, and laughing all the while, they stripped off his clothing with friendly violence, and mirth-fully plunged him into the warm fluid. "Henceforth," they exclaimed, "your oath is valueless; having once entered the bath, you may without fresh perjury again and again refresh yourself with its healthful pleasures."

Now the chief vizier of the King chanced to be bathing, and felt much interested in the narrative he had heard. When Jamasp then, purified in his person, despite of his own conscientious resistance, had dressed himself, he was straightway conducted by the orders of that minister into the presence of his Sovereign, that he might amuse him likewise by a repetition of his adventures.

The royal palace lay at some considerable distance from the little town, and on his arrival there a delicious repast was prepared for him, and a dress of honour bestowed upon him, ere he was ushered into the presence of the ruler of his land. The subjects of Gusardan (for so was the monarch named) never beheld their Sovereign, who secluded himself from all the world; for he was a leper.

Reclined upon a sofa, and muffled from head to foot with a long flesh-coloured veil, the King listened, at first with an amused air, and then with excited agitation, to the marvellous story of the quondam woodcutter. At its close, tossing from him the light covering which had concealed his features, he suddenly revealed to our hero the snow-white scurfy flesh, here and there eaten into cancerous holes, which he had so long sedulously guarded from the gaze of his courtiers.

“See the horrible state to which I am reduced,” he cried with overwhelming emotion, “and save your Sovereign; bring hither the Queen of the Serpents — she alone can cure me.”

For his physician had assured him that the sole remedy for his otherwise incurable complaint was the stewed flesh of the Snake Queen, a panacea which until that moment he saw no possibility of procuring. He concealed, however, from Jamasp his designs upon the life of the half-human reptile, for the friendly feeling of our hero towards the being who had spared him (whatever might have been her motive) was too apparent to escape his anxious observation.

Yet the widow’s son mistrusted even whilst he pitied the poor King, and vainly sought to excuse himself from the task assigned him. He did not even like to play the part of Belukia, and force from his captured patroness the secret of that remedy which would restore the suffering monarch to the enjoyment of health. Sooth to say, he was ashamed to meet the loving snake, and resisting all offers of wealth and station as the price of his compliance, urged his violated vow, and the possibility of her vengeance as an adequate reason for his reluctance to encounter her.

Then the enfeebled King silently desponded, and again veiled himself; but the vizier, who alone besides was present, thus in angry tones addressed the unwilling offender: “Refuse to obey, and you quit not this palace alive: never shall you reveal the pitiable plight of our sovereign to your fellow-citizens; else will they despise and revolt against their lord. Take now your choice. I pledge my word that no evil shall happen to your benefactress (as you foolishly term her) should she accede to our wishes; I vow, on the other hand, that unimaginable tortures, to escape which death itself would seem a boon, shall otherwise wrest from you your secret mode (for all else is known to us) of invoking her presence.”

Who could resist such menaces? Yet it was not until the torturers had essayed their foul skill upon his anguished frame that he yielded a sullen compliance to the will of the pitiless vizier, who had been calmly watching his writhings with an assured and triumphant smile of irony.

Heavily ironed, and guarded with stern vigilance by ruthless soldiers, he

was taken to the remote cave, and there forced to utter the far-sounding sibilation which would entice the hapless Queen to her captivity. Poor loving wretch! she was close at hand, longingly waiting for the expected sound. Scarcely had it passed his lips, when she glided through the crevice in the old reservoir, and found herself, not in the embrace of her beloved youth, but in the muscular arms of a brawny forester, who, clasping her suddenly by the neck, forced her into the cage that had been prepared for her reception. The manacles upon the hands of Jamasp, his woe-begone aspect, the tears which gushed from his eyes when he beheld her so roughly handled, told her, without words, how unwilling had been his participation in her capture.

“I forgive you my early death, Jamasp,” she cried. “I know the reason of my capture, and the disease of the King. It is my life they are seeking; but perhaps you knew it not, else you could scarcely have betrayed one whose sole error was in loving too well a child of Adam.”

Then did Jamasp solemnly protest his ignorance of their intended cruelty, and declared what tortures he had endured ere he had consented to be a party to her capture.

“Carry me, then, dear Jamasp, yourself, and I will whisper in your ears whilst you bear me on your head, what you must do in this sad contingency.”

He was permitted to carry the encaged snake, and returned, still encircled by menacing guards, to the palace of his sovereign. There, by the orders of the overjoyed monarch, he was at once liberated, richly appareled, and promised his choice of all the dignities in the kingdom. Now the vizier heard the promise, and quaked for his own office; for all men, he thought, must envy him his power.

On the road, the Snake Queen had sadly, yet with calm resignation, told the man she loved the doom which was awaiting her.

“They will bid you sever my body into three pieces, and stew it upon the fire, as a savoury dish for the sick monarch. I *must* perish, for surrounded as we are escape is hopeless; but let not my blood be shed by you: refuse boldly; the King will side with you.”

“I will die rather,” replied the penitent Jamasp.

“You shall not die,” rejoined the captive, “but live and prosper, if you will carefully follow my advice. The vizier will order you to watch beside my seething flesh until the scum shall float upon the surface of the broth, then to pour forth a cupful of the liquor and reserve it for yourself; again to wait until the boiling recommences, and pour forth a second cup for him. Act not thus; but let our common enemy swallow the first cup, and then drink the second yourself. The first juice is deadly; the second brain-clearing, and the bestower of all wisdom.”

So our hero followed her advice, boldly refusing to perform the office of an executioner; and as the cook refused to slay a semi-human being, the impatient vizier himself smote off the lovely head, and hewed asunder the crystal-line body with his remorseless scimitar. At that moment an imperative summons for his immediate appearance arrived from the King; so, leaving strict orders as to the

broth, precisely as had been foretold by the victim, he abruptly quitted the spacious kitchen.

When, at length, he returned, the first cup was presented to him by the obsequious Jamasp, who assured him that he had not ventured to sip his own from deference to his superior rank. With a baleful smile, for he had resolved that a possible rival, and assuredly a contumacious adversary, should perish, he fixed his cruel eyes upon the youth, who loathingly gulped down the not unpalatable liquid; then triumphantly he swallowed his own portion, and fell shrieking with inconceivable agony upon the ground. His flesh swelled, blackened, and rotted from his bones; his carcass stank with so horrible a fœtor, that it was dragged away with a hook and rope, and cast unburied upon slackened lime, for no man ventured to touch it for fear of contagion.

But Jamasp, who, mistrusting his own fate, fled swiftly from the scene of horror, only at first felt increased powers of observation and quickened judgment from his undesired draught; from that time, however, all knowledge became easy of acquirement by him.

The leper-king ate of the stewed flesh of her who had been slain to cure him; and he, too, was punished; for the flesh became burning fire within him, and the fever that consumed him raged to wild delirium, and a thousand times in his three days of torture did he experience the anguish of that violent death which had been inflicted, by his orders, upon his unoffending victim. Then, at last, thanks to the cooling drinks they gave him, he burst into a profuse sweat, the hideous chasms which the leprosy had hollowed in his body gradually filled with healthy flesh; his outer skin peeled off, and the inner showed itself soft and rosy as in a new-born babe.

Months elapsed ere vigour was restored to his debilitated frame, and as by that time the fame of the wisdom of the sage's son was spread abroad, the grateful monarch promoted him to the post of his defunct minister. But seldom thenceforth did a smile irradiate the sad countenance of Jamasp, for remorse preyed upon him for betraying her, who, even in death, had cared for his happiness.



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