

MAAROOF THE TREASURE-SEEKER

(Including the 'City of Brass,' part of the 'Seven Viziers,' part of Ibrahim and Jemeeleh,' etc.)

I doubt whether in all Cairo there was a more miserable being than Maarooft. It was not merely that he was a poor man, so poor, indeed, that he knew not in the morning whether he should gain wherewithal to purchase food for the evening, but that he was cursed with an affliction, the poignancy of which none but those who have themselves experienced it can duly estimate. He had wedded a shrew, — one, moreover, who was self-willed, violent, and full of fancies.

He had not always occupied the humble position in which he now moved, for his father had been a wealthy merchant, and the blood of kings flowed in the veins of his mother. But in his youth he had beheld a sight, the remembrance of which haunted him for ever after, and dispelled all purposes of steady industry. He had seen the City of Brass; he had gazed upon the countless treasures that were stored in its mansions, yet had not been permitted to remove a single jewel.

It happened thuswise. On his first journey with merchandise, he had encountered the cavalcade of a certain Emir, Moosa by name, who had been dispatched by his lord, El Melik, who ruled at Damascus, to procure him some of those brazen urns which fame has handed down to us as the prisons of rebellious genii. The tradition ran that, when they were unsealed, a spiral column of smoke would eddy forth, which assumed for an instant only the image of a towering giant, whilst, "Pardon, O Prophet!" thundered forth from the rapidly dissolving form. To behold so wonderful a sight was longed for by El Melik, and as some travellers had assured the monarch that these urns were frequently fished up by a negro race, worthy and hospitable islanders, who dwelt in the Southern Main, he had resolved to procure and inspect them. Accordingly, he had sent the Emir with a large retinue in that direction; and as Maarooft was journeying by a like route, he joined, by permission, the princely traveller.

After some days' riding they lost their road, and wandering further and further from the track of caravans, found themselves at the base of a mighty range of mountains, — precipice upon precipice soaring upwards until the summit of the highest was lost in the clouds of heaven. All around looked barren and cheerless; for the earth seemed scorched up, and was split into vast clefts by the action of subterranean fires, and not a blade of grass or a pool of water was visible as far as the eye could reach. Suddenly a blast of wind, howling from the adjacent gulf, scattered the dense mist that had obscured the sun, and the rays of that luminary, reflected from thirty towers of gilded brass which were perched upon the loftiest of the mountains, almost blinded the eyes by their painful brilliance. Once

in a century only had such a sight been permitted to mortals, for in that elevated region of constant mist, the clouds rarely displayed the far-famed City of Brass; and so perilous was the road to it, so far removed from the ordinary routes, that no man living could boast that he had entered it. Yet the whole company knew of its existence, had heard tell how hundreds of years ago this mighty city, whose broad-based walls were eighty cubits high, had been ruled over by a queen, during whose reign the surrounding land had been so desolated by ceaseless famine, that everything that had life within its nostrils had perished.

The Emir Moosa, who, like his sovereign, was greedy of strange sights, determined not to lose so rare a chance of inspecting this renowned city; and as the weather continued bright, and the labour of his many attendants enabled him to bridge over the awful chasms that intervened between the adjacent heights, he at length, after long and painful climbing, reached the ridge round which the brazen towers were symmetrically disposed. Not a keyhole was visible in the metallic gates: the walls were too lofty to scale, and the disappointed Emir with his weary escort having ridden round the vast circuit of the fortifications in the fruitless hope of espying some other mode of entry, prepared to depart. But Maarroof, who noticed on the principal gate the bas-relief of a horseman pointing with his finger to some antique and half-obliterated letters graven on the walls, lingered to decipher the following inscription: —

“Let him who would enter,
Turn the pin in my centre.”

He read, shouted, grasped a boss which he perceived jutting out from the sculptured belt of the warlike effigy, and violently wrenched it round: then with a terrific din the metallic gates dashed open, as it were, of their own accord, and all the company entered the city of the dead. The buildings seemed perfect as on the day of their erection; gold and jewels were found mixed with carious bones; but the merchandise had rotted and the furniture had decayed. The handsomest of the buildings had evidently been a palace or temple, and from its grandeur and superb architecture attracted their special curiosity. They strayed through its courts and chambers until they arrived before a door of cedar-wood, inlaid with ebony and ivory; having passed through which, they were startled by the sight of three individuals, life-like but motionless. Upon a couch, a perfect mine of carbuncles and emeralds, at the summit of a high dais, reposed a lovely woman, guarded on either side by a huge black slave, one armed with a sword, the other with a bar of steel. A tablet of gold lay on the ground before them; on this was written, “If you value life, touch not the queen: let her be an eternal testimony to the skill and opulence of this lost nation. All that is without this chamber she gives to her visitors.” So exquisitely preserved were the handsome features of the principal figure of this natural group, that it was difficult to believe that she no longer breathed: her two guardians, though cleverly sculptured, were mere images of wood. The dress of the female was entirely composed of pearls; a golden crown

with a border of large rubies spanned her brow; a necklace of diamonds, as large as pigeons' eggs, hung loosely round her neck.

The Emir gazed with awe upon the sight, and bade his people respect the last wishes of departed royalty, close again the palace, shut the brazen gate, and as their provisions threatened to fail them, to instantly depart from the city on the quest for the mystic urns. To refrain from treasures such as their eyes now gazed on was more than they could bear: a daring mutineer ran up the steps of the dais, and tried to snatch the crown from the inanimate figure of the starved queen; scarcely had he touched her body than he became lifeless as herself. The sword and bar had descended simultaneously upon him, moved by some hidden machinery that connected the automatons with the lifelike corpse. When the weapons had achieved their destined work, they returned with a jerk to their threatening position. None dared move the body, and the mutiny was quelled: the Emir and his escort retraced the perilous pathway they had formed, and after much privation reached again the main road from which they had diverged, and, it is said, succeeded without further difficulty in the object of their mission.

But as to Maarroof, from that hour he never rested; the unguarded treasures he had feasted his eyes on so surpassed the slower profits of trade, that he relinquished thenceforth all idea of merchandise. His ideas became too princely for his station; he looked down upon the thousand comforts which were at his beck: unlimited wealth, the representative of every enjoyment, the assuager even of sorrow and suffering might be acquired in a week by daring and good fortune. Was he to be blamed, if with the buoyant hopes of youth and its too sanguine spirit of enterprise, he risked his all upon efforts which proved his ruin?

He had left the Emir Moosa at the nearest town (yet it was far away, for the curse of sterility still lingered upon the adjacent lands) to the city of the dead, and from thence he headed expedition after expedition to recover the treasures he had perforce abandoned. He would have gone alone, for he felt conscious how irresistible was the temptation of despoiling the capitalist who had defrayed the cost; but it was imperatively requisite to carry large stores of provisions; and the awful precipices which had been surmounted, the frightful chasms which had been passed by him, when escorted under the most favourable circumstances by experienced and disciplined warriors, convinced him of the necessity of being accompanied by a large body of daring mechanics. Labour, low as the individual cost may seem (especially to him who receives the wage of it), is the most costly of expenditure; and as exploration after exploration failed, from the black brooding clouds which concealed the site of the lost city, the hopes and the resources of our hero diminished in like proportion. Fortune seemed his enemy; for when he had become so reduced that he could only form a partnership with one or two adventurers who still trusted to his glowing accounts of the treasure-city, the clouds would burst asunder and disclose the pathway he had traversed in happier days. Yet he could never trace it to the brazen towers; either the abysses had

grown more profound than ever, or the needful wood to cross them had been miscalculated. It was hard enough for the famishing explorers to transport their fodder and provisions, without any superfluous burden being carried on their mules. At last, after many a baffled enterprise, he became penniless.

In love he had been equally unlucky. Before he had started upon his mercantile journey he had become a married man. Who would not have envied him, had they beheld his wife? It was a love-match, the fruits of a romantic incident in his young career; and the risks he had encountered in gaining his bride should have rendered her ever loving, and obedient to his gentle sway. But the same passions which had favoured his suit proved adverse to him in his fallen estate. He had beheld the portrait of a lovely woman in a book that he had purchased, and so life-like did it seem, so fascinating in its weird beauty, that he could not obliterate the image from his thoughts.

“Tell me, I beg you,” said he to the dealer, “from whence you obtained this miniature; is it the work of fancy, or was it copied from a living female?”

“Sandalanee can inform you, for from him I purchased it,” was the answer; “he lives in the quarter El Karkh.”

Thither hurried the impetuous youth, for desire is fanned in youth by the mere breath of imagination, and destiny so far favoured him that he became intimate with the painter. In a friendly gossip the purchased sketch was exhibited, and the name of the original demanded.

“She is a distant connection of my own,” said Sandalane; “one whom I would gladly wed, did my rank permit it: she is the daughter of the Governor of Suez, and so averse to marriage that I, with more than competence, and in art second to none, have failed to win her. Her name is Jemeeleh.”

Our hero did not inquire whether the years of the amative painter were or were not twice as numerous as those of the beauty; he obtained her address, and sallied forth in quest of her, despite of her rumoured reputation as an incorrigible vixen. She dwelt on a little islet in the bend of the great river, a spot which belonged to her father, and from which all males were rigorously excluded. There was one exception — a deformed gardener, who from an elevated seat watched all who might approach; and by good luck, as Maarooof in his ignorance then esteemed it, his own humpbacked tailor chanced to be the brother of the guardian. By the introduction of the former and the connivance of the latter, he was enabled to gaze upon the charms of the lovely maiden in her solitary retreat, to profit by the passionate longings of her wanton temperament, and to bear her off as his willing prize from her wealthy parent. He had carried off his mistress in a vessel manned and equipped by the treacherous Sandalane, been drugged and thrown ashore by his crew, who had borne the helpless girl to their unscrupulous employer; had, after a narrow escape from death, rescued his bride from the clutches of her would-be ravisher, and eventually conducted her in all honour to his own home, where he legally espoused her. Surely mutual peril, mutual

endurance should have endeared them to each other.

To provide her with all those elegances to which she had been accustomed, was the stimulus which urged Maarroof to his chimerical pursuit of the hidden treasure. He was not luxurious in personal expenditure, and never repined at the painful privations which he suffered in the wild mountainous region that encircled the City of Brass. Perhaps Jemeeleh might have pardoned his frequent absences (though I doubt it, so warm were her passions), because they were inspired, or at least influenced, by his tenderness for herself; but penury, and its attendant slights and denials, proved unbearable to a woman whose every wish had hitherto been gratified. Among her intimates was an old woman, one of the thousand pious hypocrites who enter the harem under the pretext of sanctity. She was neither more nor less than a procuress, who, for a bribe from some wealthy roue, would further his intrigues with willing wantons. After the third or fourth visit of Maarroof to the scene of his fascination, he descried, on his return home, a costly veil, one which he had neither given himself, nor had his wife previously possessed, hidden, as it were, beneath the seat she had been occupying. It was the gift of a rich young merchant, who had been fully repaid (at least he so considered) for his liberality. Jemeeleh, at that time inexperienced in deceit, could not account for its possession, and blushed and equivocated when interrogated respecting it. Distrust and coldness ensued; and as Maarroof was assuredly the handsomest man she knew, and one whom she would have preferred to any other admirer, could he have always gratified her caprices and her passions, the mischievous crone was consulted as to the mode by which the suspicions of the husband could be effectually removed, and his ardour resuscitated.

“Had the veil any peculiar mark by which it could be identified?” inquired the crafty adviser.

“My husband noticed it was burnt at the edge,” said the abandoned wife.

“Leave all to me, then,” was the response; “he shall soon apologize for his shrewd suspicions.”

When Maarroof, the next morning, was passing the shop of the amorous merchant, a previously rehearsed scene was played to deceive him. The young profligate was reviling, and roughly handling an aged female, who bore this treatment with humble equanimity, owning she had merited it by her delinquency.

“Why are you ill-treating the poor old creature?” inquired the tender-hearted Maarroof.

“I trusted her with a costly veil to repair for me,” was the answer; “it had a slight hole burnt in it, and she engaged to restore it to my slave-girl, perfect as ever, in two days. Now she pretends to have left it in some harem, but knows not where; I suspect the loss was intentional.”

“Indeed, I lost it,” said the cunning crone. “I am very poor, and obtain alms from the charitable inmates of so many harems, that I know not at this moment where precisely I did leave it; but to-morrow I make my rounds, and shall easily

recognize it by its scorched edge.”

“Permit her to depart,” said the deluded treasure-seeker. “I will be responsible; it was accidentally left in my own dwelling.”

So Maarooof asked pardon of Jemeelah for his suspicions, and after a little scolding it was graciously accorded.

Success gives confidence; so the next time she was caught transgressing, she extricated herself by her own unaided cunning. Being very greedy for presents, she had encouraged the addresses of two lovers at the same time. One was a dependant of the higher in rank, and as the latter had made his appearance while the former was closeted with her, she had hidden the inferior in a secret chamber. Scarcely had she coyly received the advances of the wealthier visitor, than intimation was brought of the return of Maarooof. Her husband became witness to a scene improvised by herself, and skilfully seconded by the surprised admirer. As Maarooof entered the house he beheld a man in a towering passion reviling his wife, and menacing her with a drawn sword. At his approach Jemeelah cast herself into his arms for protection, and the actor took advantage of his embarrassing entanglement to escape from the house.

“What caused this scene?” cried the deluded husband, after she had recovered from a well-simulated fit of hysterics.

“I was sitting on the terrace-roof of our house,” she answered, “when a young man, flying in terror from an armed opponent, rushed across the barrier wall, and flinging himself at my feet, implored me to save him from an unmerited death by concealing him in my dwelling. I had barely time to hide him beneath the trap-door of our chamber, when the ruffian who fled at your presence followed his victim, and demanded him at my hands. I denied his presence, for I could not abandon a suppliant to slaughter before my eyes; hence your opportune return has perhaps saved even myself from the unreasoning violence of his rage. I have sacrificed the proprieties, but I have saved the life of a fellow-creature.”

“You have done well,” said Maarooof, “we will assuage the terror of the imprisoned one.”

So with his own kind hands he set free the younger of the two profligates, and saw that the coast was clear before he dismissed him from his abode. That man never again polluted the sanctity of his home; but Jemeelah gloried in her cunning, and no longer repressed her lusts or her rapacity.

Maarooof soon learnt enough from his neighbours to be mentally convinced of the wrong that was done him by his wife; yet could never convict her in the fact. His frequent absence had given her every opportunity for intrigue; but he had now become so impoverished, that he could barely maintain himself and Jemeelah by the pittance he received, from day to day, for his own manual labour. Yes, he who had ridden at the head of fifty horsemen, glorying in the prospect of unlimited wealth, and rejoicing in the beauty of his newly won bride, now disheartened, and without a single piece of gold in his possession, longed above all things to be rid

of a wife who at once betrayed and insulted him. For her temper, naturally sharp and overbearing, had not improved under adversity, and she hated and despised the man whose love had reduced her to poverty. As he no longer quitted the city, she had no opportunity for indulging herself in gay garments and delicate living at the expense of her lovers, and indignant reminiscences of past enjoyments made her eloquently vituperative. She was a tall and masculine woman; her husband slender, and enfeebled by self-denial — for the best of all the food was devoured by Jemeeleh — scraps only appeased the appetite of the earner of the viands. That which was at first proffered from affection was soon taken as a right, and the quondam treasure-hunter was scolded, ay, and sometimes smitten as a rebellious slave, when his purse could not fulfil the demands made upon it by the beautiful virago.

When his last coin had disappeared, and he had not the wherewithal to purchase even bread, a fancy for some honey sprang up in the mind of the long-indulged Jemeeleh. After inveighing against her spouse for having reduced her to a position in which even honey was a rare luxury (he bore all this patiently, for there was some truth in the accusation), she imperiously demanded that he should procure her some that very day. He humbly assured her that he was utterly without the means of buying it; for the scanty surplus of each day's earnings had been invariably expended in propitiating the temper of the shrew by gratifying her appetite.

“Steal it if you can't buy it!” she exclaimed, shaking her slipper at him; “only bring home the honey, or you shall rue it.”

In this emergency, for he dreaded above all things an angry altercation with the woman who had once been dear to him, he betook himself to a small provision-store, where occasionally he obtained credit.

“I don't keep bees' honey,” said the plausible trades-man, “but you can have cane-honey, which is cheaper, and goes further.”

Though Maarooft was aware that cane-honey was only a specious trade name for common treacle, he accepted the proposed substitute; he dared not, indeed, dispute the matter with the only shopkeeper who would supply him upon trust. He apologetically handed the coarse relish to his exigent spouse, saying, “It is only cane-honey, but I could procure nothing better upon credit.”

“Wretch!” cried the disappointed gourmand, “would you put me off with trash like this? Do you call this honey?” And she flung the treacle in his face; and not content with that insult, for it had plastered but one side of it, she struck him so violently on the unsoiled cheek that she knocked out one of his teeth. Then passion overcame the long submissive husband, and he returned the blow, yet rather to deter her from further violence than to punish her as she deserved. Screaming for help like one aggrieved, she seized her husband's beard, and tore at it with all her might. Verily Maarooft had not the better in this domestic conflict.

“When her neighbours entered the room, they saw how matters stood, and

reprimanded the virago for her outrageous conduct. She, however, not satisfied with her revenge, for it was the first time her partner had ventured to resist her temper, summoned him before the Cadi of the district for beating her, and pretended that he had broken her arm and injured her chest. The witnesses, however, proved the contrary; so the case was dismissed. Again she applied to another magistrate, with like success, and eventually appealed to the supreme tribunal.

As the acquitted defendant had, each time, been forced to disburse the customary fees of office, the prospect of further litigation involved the necessity of either parting with his tools, so that he could no longer obtain a living, or of an immediate flight from Cairo. He preferred the latter expedient, and led a wandering life of constant hard-ship, rambling further and further from Egypt, until he arrived at the most distant region of the earth. As travel-stained and footsore, he passed at dusk through a handsome suburb of the capital of Sind, he was accosted by an angry group of four individuals, whose previously loud voices had been hushed at his approach.

“We have just agreed,” said the deputed speaker, “to avoid litigation, and abide by the decision of the first stranger who will consent to act as umpire. The judge’s fee shall not be wanting.”

“What, then, is the subject of your dispute?” inquired the willing arbitrator.

“Four foreigners, partners in some mercantile transaction, left their joint stock of loose cash in my charge. Within a week, one of them reclaimed it, gave me a discharge, and, being a rogue, bolted with the money, thus swindling his three partners of their respective shares. They now claim three-fourths of the deposit at my hands.”

“Yes,” interrupted one of the merchants, “for we stipulated that it should only be returned upon the joint application of all of us.”

“The case, then, is simple,” said the traveller; “the money cannot be refunded, until the absconded partner shall join in demanding it.”

The three foreigners bowed to his decision, and as their departure from the country had been solely delayed from this unsettled dispute, at once quitted the city. Their departure proved advantageous to Maarroof in the sequel.

Our hero was invited by the man who had gained by his verdict to enter his stately mansion, and after having washed himself, found his shabby clothes replaced by robes as handsome as those which adorned his host.

“Surely we have met before,” said Maarroof, when, after a savoury repast, they were left alone by the attendants. “I have gazed upon you, and the memory of past frolics shared together comes vividly before me. Are you not Ali, the son of our druggist, Ahmad?”

His entertainer, whose antecedents were not wholly favourable, winced at the question, and at first equivocated; but, as the conviction of the guest as to his identity could not be shaken, he changed his tactics, and, assuming an air of

jovial frankness, laughingly observed: — “So you recognize me. I would not acknowledge my name until I had tested your acquaintance with our native town. I am, indeed, Ali, the scamp of our district, who so often led you into mischief, and whom all the wiseacres prophesied would come to ruin. Don’t you remember what fun we had together as boys: how we worried the Christians by running off with the books from their churches?”

And they roared with laughter as they pictured to themselves the enraged priests, who, panting, perspiring, and loudly threatening the vengeance of Heaven upon their sacrilege, had, after a long and fruitless chase, picked up the muddy volumes from a foul kennel.

“Nevertheless, when I see the style in which you are living, I can hardly realize the fact of your being my old playfellow,” said the guest, after their merry reminiscences. “What capital did you possess when you arrived in these parts?”

“A very small one, I can assure you; but luck and talent soon enabled me to enlarge my operations. I will tell you my history, and then give you some good advice, to guide your conduct with the arrogant natives.”

The King of the Beggars

“It’s all fair in business, I know, to outwit each other; but it’s very annoying to get the worst of a bargain. I had heard before I started for this country that sandalwood was so highly valued here, that the profits of the dealers who imported it were almost incredible. Hence, I invested my little all in that profitable commodity, and having indicated my cargo to the officer of the port, was permitted to disembark. I had been warned that the inhabitants were knavish and overreaching, yet as I had never yet been worsted by sharpers, who, thinking all but themselves fools, are easily gulled by fair words (and I can romance with any man in this lying city), I paid little heed to the caution which had been suggested. I had scarcely stepped on shore, when a respectable-looking citizen, who had ascertained what I had imported at the custom-house, and prepared accordingly, inquired what merchandise I had brought with me; and upon my replying truly, and stating I had been told that sweet-scented wood was much used in this country, smilingly assented, but added, “Yet for what vile purposes! See for yourself, and duly estimate the value of the information you have received.’ He entered a caravanserai, and there I beheld a mule-driver cooking his food over a fire of the wood I had held so precious. I was so disconcerted that I almost wept from vexation, and felt cheered when the sharper, for such he was, offered me in exchange for my cargo a big measure full of any commodity (jewels alone excepted) I might prefer; for I calculated that if I asked for gold I should not lose much, if at

all, by my venture. Consequently, I accepted the offer, but would not name my preference on that day; for there are some drugs more precious than gold itself. He had scarcely left me, when I was pounced upon by another sharper, a one-eyed man, who, accusing me of having put out his eye, demanded the right of plucking out one of mine, if I would not pay him the value of that he had lost. The decision of this affair I likewise put off until the morrow; and as my shoe had burst, left it to be mended at the stall of a cobbler. I merely promised him, in lieu of a stipulated sum, to gratify him when I returned for it.

“Done!” he cried, with a sardonic chuckle that roused my suspicions. ‘You heard the agreement, my friends.’ And some sinister-looking fellows, who had gradually surrounded the stall, grinning at each other, cordially assented.

“In the course of the same day I strolled into a refreshment-room, where I joined a merry party who were playing at a game of forfeits, expecting that the penalty, if I lost (and I was bound to perform the behest of the winner), would be one of those absurdities which are usual concomitants of that childish game. When I proved unsuccessful, they bade me drink up the sea, unless I would forfeit all that I had about me.

“By this time to-morrow,’ I said, ‘I shall have received the price of my cargo, and will then settle the affair with you.’ So I was permitted by the hopeful sharpers (for they too belonged to that fraternity) to leave the room without being hustled.

“Before night I had found, to my vexation, that I had not only been swindled about the wood, but had likewise got into three awkward dilemmas. I had thought myself a clever fellow: I need scarcely dilate upon my humiliation. My despondency was noticed by a mendicant whom I had relieved on my first landing. He observed the gloom upon my visage, and rightly conjectured what had happened.

“Ah! master,’ said he, “our knaves have proved too keen for you; but take my advice, and you may perhaps turn the tables upon them. Go to our king; I don’t mean the king of the rich, but the sheikh of us beggars; he is blind as a bat, but the eyes of his intellect are so piercing that no man has ever yet outwitted him. If any one can save you, it is he; he gets us out of all our scrapes, and his fee is but trifling.’ I adopted his suggestion, rewarded him as my guide for leading me to the palace (it was a dirty vault) of the lauded potentate, and, after a preliminary offering, revealed my difficulties for his solution. Having pondered for a while, he thus answered me:

“As to the purchaser of your cargo, you would lose, should he fill the measure with gold, for every pound of sandal-wood is here worth ten pieces of that metal. Bid him, then, fill it with living fleas, half of which precisely must be females.

“As to the false accuser, assert that your own eye is larger and hence better than his, and demand that both should pluck out an eye to weigh against each

other; the one-eyed will refuse, for else he would become perfectly blind.

“As to the cobbler, who would refuse to be gratified by any gift less than all your property, address him thus: “The king has just defeated his adversaries; are you not gratified?” He must say yes, or he would be punished as a traitor.

“As to the forfeit, say boldly, “I am ready to drink up the sea, but you must bring it me in bulk, for I am neither bound to walk to the shore nor to gulp its brine in driblets.” You will thus circumvent all these rogues and save your money.’

“I acted by his counsel, and was not only extricated from my predicament, but received a considerable sum from the purchaser of the sandal-wood to let him off his bargain. Eventually I gained so large a profit by my investment, that I obtained credit everywhere; and now, thanks to that and my own natural swagger, I am considered the first merchant in the country.

“So much for my experience. Now for my advice. This is a commercial country, and wealth is esteemed above all things. He who is poor is despised; he whose friends are poor shares in the obloquy. None will recognise the vagrant of this morning in the well-clad merchant of tomorrow. The great secret of success here is to obtain credit; seem rich, and you soon become so, for fast and marvellous are the profits of trade. I will provide you in the morning with a purse of gold, which you must treat as dross, and introduce you to my set, as a friend and foreign correspondent, the chief merchant of Cairo. Your merchandise, you understand, is in transit: at the worst, your ship can be wrecked without loss to yourself, and our integrity will be unimpeached.”

“I like not such crooked ways,” said Maarroof. “I had better own at once I have lost my all, and crave employment.”

“Yes, and shame me,” replied his host. “If you were as well versed in fables as I am, you would think differently. Perhaps you never heard the saying of the young lion?”

“I know not what you mean.”

“I’ll tell you, then; the fable is but brief. A young lion, who had never seen a man, astonished at beholding the beasts of the forest in commotion, inquired the cause of their consternation, ‘We are flying from the son of Adam,’ they cried, without pausing in their flight. ‘What terrific monster can that be?’ thought the royal beast. I will at least take a look at him ere I follow the example of the forest-dwellers.’ A meagre and aged carpenter, who stooped beneath the weight of the planks he bore upon his shoulders, emerged from the trees. The lion scornfully advanced towards him: ‘Son of Adam, what do you purpose here?’

“To build myself a house, by your permission, O King of the plains,’ was the humble answer.

“Build on,’ said the flattered beast, ‘but if I like it, I shall take it for myself.’

“A big box, with a very strong lock and hinges, was soon constructed, and the lid left open. His majesty stepped in to see whether it was large enough for him,

and the man slamming down the lid, locked in the lion. *'Cunning is letter than strength,'* cried the caged beast; 'and so have I, too, found it.'

Long adversity weakens good principles; so Maarroof yielded to the counsel of Ali, and, on the morrow, in accordance with it, answered each inquiry of the merchants as to whether such and such an article was included in his cargo, by the preconcerted reply, "I have plenty of it." And as this was affirmed of every commodity, and as the contents of the purse were lavished with careless profusion, and chiefly in alms, his reputation for incalculable wealth became established. When, therefore, on the day after, he shook his empty purse at an importunate mendicant, saying, "I would give you alms were I as well known here as elsewhere, for I could then borrow the purse of my neighbour," one of the merchants, anxious to oblige so wealthy an individual, proffered the loan of his, which he at first refused, saying, "I cannot pay until my ship comes over," but when pressed, accepted with courteous thanks. And from time to time, as his lavish expenditure required it, he obtained, unasked, a like favour from other merchants. At length, as no merchandise made its appearance, suspicion was aroused, and loans were no longer proffered. Then addressing Ali when in the company of the very individuals to whom he had been introduced by him as a vast capitalist, he said, with a grand air, "Ali, lend me your purse;" and the cunning man was compelled to do so, for how could he refuse to trust the great merchant of whose acquaintance he had boasted? When they were alone, however, he demanded it back, but the adventurer had profited by the teaching of his playmate, who had originally suggested the answer, and replied, "Wait until my ship comes over."

"Nonsense!" growled Ali. "You know you have nothing."

"Yes; I have plenty of it," said his apt pupil.

In the heyday of his reputation for opulence, the King of that country, who, like his subjects, worshipped wealth, conceived the idea of wedding his daughter to him, for thus, he thought, he should induce the millionaire to settle in his city, and in the event of his decease keep all his riches in his own family. But, as he had no son, his chief minister had determined to marry her himself, and succeed to the throne when it should be vacated by his decease. Hence he insinuated that Maarroof was no merchant, but a mere pretender; upon which the monarch, who prided himself upon his acuteness, hit upon an expedient to detect his ignorance. He exhibited before him a pearl, for which he had paid a thousand pieces (a large price in the estimation of the monarch), and asked his opinion of its value.

"Rubbish! unworthy of your majesty; worth merely a thousand pieces," was the contemptuous verdict of the adventurer, as he broke the pearl and threw away the fragments.

"Have you better in your stock?" asked the astounded despot.

"A sackful! Wait until my ship comes over and select for yourself."

Then the King, thinking to profit by the generosity of so wealthy a

son-in-law, offered him his daughter, and was surprised when Maarroof declined the honour until the arrival of his merchandise.

“For how shall I otherwise defray the expenses of the festival in a style worthy of your daughter and my own established name?”

This opposition increased the longing of the monarch to effect the alliance. He intrusted the Egyptian with the keys of his treasury, bidding him expend from it without stint until the arrival of his long-expected vessel.

So Maarroof wedded the Princess, and spared not the riches of the King upon the joyful occasion. And after the ceremony, a lucrative office of trust and dignity was bestowed upon him, and he lived upon his own resources. He proved a tender and loving husband to the King’s daughter, and won her heart entirely. Yet, as time went on and no merchandise arrived, the monarch began to doubt his veracity, and at the suggestion of his ambitious minister (who would have hated any son-in-law of his master, however virtuous) bade his daughter cajole her husband into telling her the truth. “I will torture him to death,” said the indignant parent, “if he has imposed upon our credulity.”

“My beloved,” said the Princess at nightfall, as she fondly caressed her husband, “I fear for thee. All men say thou hast deceived my father; and as the truth must be revealed at last, it is better to be prepared for the event. Let us take counsel together, that I may save thee, for thou knowest thou art an impostor, and didst become so for love of me. Was it not so, darling?” And she wound her arms around him and kissed him. By this affectionate guile he was brought to confess, and he unfolded his past history to her, neither concealing the straits he had been reduced to, nor the degrading cause of his flight from Cairo.

“Listen, my own,” said the Princess at the conclusion of his adventures. “I love thee more than ever for thy frankness, and this reliance upon me. Know that I was bidden by my father and his minister to coax thee into confession, that they might slay thee for thy deceit; but here all men are deceitful; and thou art not worse, but only more successful, than the rest. The depth of my affection for thee was not sounded: they thought I should loathe and despise thee as a swindler.” Now arise at once; take with thee my gold and jewels, which are worth, if I err not, fifty thousand pieces; mount our swiftest courser, and fly to some spot where my father has no sway; there trade as a merchant, send me thy address, and I will forward thee all I can amass, to increase thy capital. I will ever be faithful to thee, and should I survive my father, thou shalt share my throne.”

He passionately embraced her, crying, “If separated in this life, we shall be united in the day of resurrection;” and reluctant to leave so noble-hearted a woman, would have dallied had she not forced him to depart. Clad as a royal messenger, he passed unobstructed through the city gates, and urging his swift courser to its utmost speed, galloped ere daylight beyond pursuit.

The next morning the king sent for his daughter, to question her. Indignation flashed from her blazing eyes as she forestalled his inquiries.

“That wretch of a vizier had nearly diverted the affection of my husband from me. Just as I was about proving him, an eunuch brought him a letter, which I sportively snatched from his hands, and read aloud. It ran as follows: — ‘ Pirates attacked us with fireballs, and burnt goods to the value of some thousand pieces of gold; but we mastered them, and now await their trial and condemnation. This retards our arrival.’ ‘Let the rascals keep their heads,’ cried my husband, ‘they deserve, indeed, to lose them, but my credit must not be imperilled by so paltry an affair; had I not been the son-in-law of the king, it would have been ruined for ever by this ridiculous delay.’ And he mounted his horse, and rode off to bring on his merchandise by land.”

Thus she delayed for a time — I say not that she acted rightly, but was it not pardonable in a loving wife? — the pursuit of her husband.

Maarroof rode onwards until his wearied steed could no longer bear him. Then he dismounted, and asked hospitality from a husbandman.

“I have not the means of entertaining you at hand,” said the peasant; “but I will start at once for the nearest village, and purchase the best I can.”

In his absence the sudden guest busied himself in ploughing the ground, a work his host had desisted from in order to fulfil the duties of hospitality. His plough-share soon stopped, its progress being arrested by some unyielding obstacle. The ground was new, or rather it was the site of an ancient city, and had not been tilled for centuries. Maarroof urged on the oxen; they strained, but could not proceed; he then examined the cause of the stoppage of his team, and beheld a strong ring of metal, which was firmly attached to a large slab of marble. He raised the stone with difficulty, and was rewarded by the discovery of a deep vault, wherein tall vases promised him all the delights of a treasure-chamber. He descended the flight of steps which led to it, and ascertained to a certainty that each vase was filled to the brim with gold and precious stones. His first intention was to remove all these, his next to investigate still further the contents of the vault. At the further end, enshrined in a casket of crystal, he descried a seal-ring, the stone of which was engraved with sprawling characters which resembled the tracks of flies upon a wall. He could not read the ciphers, although he was not unlearned; so in the vague hope of some mysterious power to be engendered by their touch, he placed it on his left hand, and rubbed the hieroglyphic characters with the inner part of his right-hand fingers. Darkness enveloped all things, and from the brooding mist there issued a voice, saying, —

“Now and ever at thy service, O lord of the talisman. Wilt thou that I destroy a town, or re-build a deserted city? All things are alike to the impassible slave of the enchanted ring.”

“Who art thou, then,” said the fugitive, “and wherefore art thou servant to this ring?”

“Even as gold to the children of earth is the symbol of past labour, so is the talisman to the children of air the symbol of expended intellect. He whose exalted

soul mastered the spirits of the elements, left us thralls to his ring, even as you mortals are thralls to the legacy of gold. I am your slave. What further information can you seek?"

Courage reanimated the heart of Maarroof. He had experienced many vicissitudes. He had risen from a mechanic to be son-in-law to a mighty monarch. He had ruled men; to rule genii was perchance easier. So his plans were matured at their very conception, and he issued his orders to the impalpable presence as though addressing one of the servants of his palace.

"Raise all these treasures to the surface of the ground, and bring hither a goodly company of attendants and of mules, that I may transport these riches to the spot I have fled from."

"To hear is to obey," was the humble rejoinder of the potent spirit, and in scarcely the interval of the lightning flash and the loud bellowing thunder, the plain was filled with a vast train of beasts of burden, and a still larger concourse of lusty drivers and armed Memlooks. The dress of all betokened the opulence of their owner, and such a *cortége* as that of Maarroof, the merchant prince, had never yet entered the gates of Sind.

The genius of the ring preceded the caravan in the guise of a messenger, and his letter invited the monarch to send an escort for the protection of riches whose amount had never been reckoned. This courier arrived so opportunely that the vizier, who had just been asserting that the departure of the Egyptian was a mere evasion of justice, was confounded; the Princess, who half fancied that the acknowledged poverty of her bridegroom was but to test her love, felt puzzled; and the cunning Ali, who believed all men were alike deceivers, felt convinced that a scheme had been concocted to hide the folly of deluded royalty.

When Maarroof became possessed of this vast wealth, he liberally recompensed the hospitable peasant, and repaid twofold all to whom he was indebted. His charming bride saluted his return with rapture, exclaiming, —

"I suspect thou wert testing my affection for thee when thou didst pretend to be poor."

But he replied evasively, "I have assayed thy soul, and found it virgin gold; I am rich, I own, beyond the dreams of avarice."

His jewels and other valuables were deposited in the King's treasury, and despite of excessive prodigality seemed never to diminish; for they were continually renewed by the genius of the ring.

Now the old king would not leave well alone, but consulted with his vizier how he might discover the source of the mysterious wealth of his liberal son-in-law.

"Wine openeth the heart of man," was the apophthegm by which the minister suggested to his lord the course of action he would have advised.

The people of that land were accustomed to the use of wine; but our hero, the follower of the true Prophet, knew not its very smell. So when invited to drink

it by the crafty colleagues who palmed it off upon him as grape-sherbet, he innocently quaffed the intoxicating juice. In the confiding trustfulness engendered by that subtle fluid he acknowledged he was indebted to his ring for the acquisition of his illimitable wealth, and at the request of his boon-companions gratified them by a sight of the hieroglyphical characters engraved thereon.

“Permit us,” said the King, “to study these ciphers at our ease, by withdrawing it from your finger.”

So the confiding son-in-law would have passed it to the father of his beloved; but the vizier clutched it from him.

“Will the genius,” said he, “equally obey the commands of any who may rub this talisman? I would fain see this marvel.”

“I suppose so,” said Maarroof; “you can try.”

The vizier rubbed the ring, and its servant obeyed the summons.

“What would you?” said he; “shall I devastate this land, or shall I quadruple its produce? All things are alike to me the impassible.”

“Away with this impostor,” said the unforgiving minister, who had never forgotten that the stranger had baffled his matrimonial project, “to the most desolate spot upon earth; there let him perish from exposure and starvation.”

The words had scarcely passed his venomous lips when the Egyptian found himself within sight of the City of Brass. He was stretched on the barren plateau of an isolated ridge, which no mortal being could descend from without mechanical appliances. The lofty walls of the long-lost race rose grandly before him; the well-remembered towers gleamed brightly in the rays of the setting sun. How often had he longed, ay prayed, to view again the spot he had quitted so reluctantly; his aspirations were accomplished — he was there, to die of hunger within bow-shot of the city. There were none to soothe his dying moments; he was alone in the midst of a vast solitude.

Yet not for long. The great belt of low black clouds which shut in the doomed city from the outer world, was suddenly riven asunder as by lightning. A living form crouched by his side; another flash as the spirit departed, and all was darkness. No sounds of insect life disturbed the silence of the night; there was not food enough in that vast wilderness to sustain the life of a solitary fly.

The deep sobs of the invisible object at his feet evinced that it belonged to humanity, so Maarroof inquired of his fellow-victim his name and country.

“Within an hour I was lord of Sind; now, like you, I am a living corpse. My son,— for I know from my own cruel sentence you are the husband of my child, — I never meant to hurt you: my fatal curiosity has involved us both in ruin. You had scarcely vanished, and the voice of the awful being still deafened my hearing when I bethought me of the ring, meaning to recall you; for you had ever treated me as king and father. My vizier was playing with it, eyeing me as a cat would a helpless mouse; he was timing, as it were, the speed of his winged messenger, and I quailed beneath his look of sneering triumph. ‘Perhaps you imagine,’ at length

he said, 'I shall deposit the talisman in your own royal hands.' 'It was intended for my inspection,' I meekly remarked, for I felt I was in his power, but dreamed not he could harbour malice towards me. 'I was not good enough to be son-in-law to the king,' he continued; 'henceforth I am the King. You preferred that beggarly upstart to him who saved you from the cares of rule. Dotard! go and console him.' And again was I conscious of the ineffable presence of the pitiless spirit; again did his chilling formula thunder in my ears: and scarcely had my minister pronounced upon me the doom of exile and starvation than my legs seemed to fail me, and I found myself prostrate on this hard and rugged soil. Accursed be the ingrate! I raised him from a slave to a noble, because of his cleverness."

"This is no time for unforgiving wrath; unless, my father, a miracle should intervene, we must die within three days. Pardon me for my past deception, even as I have pardoned you for my early death."

They wept together, and prayed fervently.

Next morning the active minister summoned all the troops, and convened a council of the head officials. He scattered gold in handfuls among the soldiers, he promised promotion to the officers, he presented rich dresses and costly jewels to the nobles and civic dignitaries.

"Our lord has departed from us," said he, "and I have punished with death that impostor, his son-in-law. The throne is vacant: I purpose to wed the Princess, and to ascend it. Is there any one here present who has a better claim? If so, let him step forward and gainsay me."

Again was largesse showered among the troops, who shouted with enthusiastic joy. None ventured, therefore, to oppose the usurper, who was consequently hailed as Sovereign, and assumed despotic authority. His first act was to apprise the daughter of the late king of his inexorable resolve to wed her that very day, or, failing her assent, to pass the night with her, however repugnant to her wishes. In vain did the holy priests (who at her private intercession ventured to address the tyrant) represent that it was contrary to religion to espouse a widow ere the days of her retirement had expired: the tyrant only mocked them, saying, "What is religion to me? I have the power of a god;" and he showed his magic ring, and warned them of its pitiless servant. So they left his court in sadness, saying to one another, "We have a devil to rule over us; our influence has departed." And the report of his supernatural might was spread abroad; no man thenceforth dared to oppose him, but all loathed, even the very army which was carousing at his expense, the avowed sorcerer.

Now the Princess, like most women, was full of guile; she felt conscious that no escape was possible from the possessor of the terrible talisman; so she resolved to throw the murderer of her father off his guard by the cordiality of her compliance with his wishes. She knew not whether her husband was still alive, but had resolved to perish rather than be faithless to him; her own weak hand should requite that forced union, should avenge the wrongs of father and of

husband. She arrayed herself, then, in her most becoming garments, and when, at night, the amorous usurper entered her chamber with a shamefaced look, yet with bullying words, announcing his determination to embrace her as his wife without the tedious delay of a ceremony, she relieved him from the embarrassment which he really felt, by softly replying, "Wherefore not? I have waited very long for you. Shall I not love my own wise countryman more than the low impostor for whose wealth I was sacrificed?"

She thus cajoled him, and he was enraptured with delight at the prospect of a willing bride; so after they were alone, she sported and toyed with him, but when he threw his arm around her, she cried with blushing cheeks, "What horrible head is that I see glaring upon me from your signet-ring?"

"Probably my spirit-slave: what matters it?"

"Nay, dearest, modesty forbids that any being should witness our caresses: remove your ring for a while; all is safe; we are quite alone."

So he, desiring in that hour of bliss to gratify the woman who had charmed him by her cheerful acquiescence to his wishes, removed the ring from his finger, and put it far away from either of them. Sportively wrestling with him, as though she sought to inflame his passions by coyly repelling his too ardent advances, she contrived to suddenly, and as it were accidentally, throw him to the ground on the side furthest away from the talisman; then snatching it from the shelf on which he had laid it, she summoned its ministering spirit to her aid. In vain did the deluded lover seek to wrest it from her hand. "Petrify him!" she had cried, ere the rolling mist had assumed the outlines of humanity or the awful formula of the impassible had been pronounced; and the hands which were tearing both signet and flesh from her fingers, were arrested in their violence; and the rage, horror, and surprise which distorted his features were immutably fixed in the living statue. She would not take his life: it would have been a sorry vengeance for the contamination she had endured from his wanton touch. At her bidding both father and husband were transported, in a minute, from the land of desolation, and again clasped in her loving arms.

On the morrow, the old King, though sadly shattered by the terrible ordeal he had sustained, held his court in solemn grandeur. The statue was brought from the cellar into which it had been cast, and was tried as a living being. It could feel, but could not move. As a convicted traitor, the sword or the bowstring would have awaited the vizier; as an avowed Infidel, he was sentenced to be calcined! His master did not long survive him: that night of horrors, that day of anticipated starvation, had crushed for ever his vital powers. Maarroof, as the husband of his daughter, was the virtual lord of Sind.

Years rolled on, our hero was happy both as husband and as father. The cares of government proved light to him; the people were content; the nation was at peace. He had no occasion for his magic ring, and as it was cumbrous and ugly, he hid it in a secret repository in his bed-chamber, in a spot known only to his

wife and his eldest son, a precocious boy, nearly ten years old. Events were few and far between; he passed an easy life of unvarying tranquillity, a perfect contrast to the chequered career of his earlier days. An incident, at last, took place, which painfully recalled to his memory the degrading history of the past. He was wont to mingle familiarly with his subjects, and preferred sauntering alone, to the attendance of that retinue which his predecessors had judged essential to their dignity. He fancied at times that a tall, foreign-looking, ragged female, whose features were decorously concealed, was dogging his footsteps; perchance she might have some petition to present, or alms to solicit, yet had not courage to advance in the presence of others. So, after noticing her behaviour for about a week, from thoughtful good-nature, he gave her an opportunity of addressing him, by walking a little way from the busier haunts of the city. He had rightly divined her wishes. She followed him rapidly, and when alone threw back her veil, and exhibited the once beautiful face of that wanton shrew, whose vile temper and loose habits had driven him from Egypt. Years, misery, and debauchery had sadly altered her for the worse, yet it needed not her words to convince him of her identity.

“I am come,” said she, in humble accents, “not to demand the rank and privileges of a wife, for I have forfeited all claim to them by my own misconduct; but to implore a mere existence from your bounty. Could you have witnessed the degradations I have sustained, the contumely I have borne in silence, and comprehend the anguish of my repentance for the ingratitude I had shown, you would pity and forgive the erring woman who was once so dear to you.” She wept bitterly; and Maarroof, who had long ceased to think of her with anger, and regarded his old troubles with the same complacency as the traveller looks back upon the rough road by which he has climbed to some desired elevation, raised her from the ground upon which, in the bitterness of humiliation, she had cast herself.

He saw mentally before him, not the squalid vagrant with eager eyes and hollow cheeks, but the handsome woman whom he, himself scorched and bleeding, had borne from the burning mansion which the desperate Sandalane had set fire to that the lovers might not survive him; he saw the fond maiden, who had nursed him night and day through the raging fever caused by the injuries sustained in her rescue; he saw the weeping girl who, for her elopement with him from the luxurious palace of her lordly father, had been cast off for ever by her indignant sire. Then the memory of the home he had been forced to abandon through the insults, the violence, the malice, the mercenary looseness of Jemeelah flashed through his brain with equal rapidity. The contest of feelings evoked by these vivid pictures of the past was but momentary: tenderness prevailed.

“You shall not starve,” he said. “I feel no anger towards you, since Heaven has avenged me. We can never more be husband and wife, but I will again provide you with all those comforts you relinquished to unite your fate to mine. But, tell

me how you have traced me to this remote region?"

"Rumour had spread throughout the earth the marvellous tale of the enchanted ring, and some of the restless beings whom you guided to the treasure-city, wandering hither, had recognized their former chief in the wealthy lord of Sind. Relying on their veracity, I have begged my way from Cairo, and, thanks to the nobility of your soul, rejoice that I have so humbled myself."

A small pavilion in the grounds of the palace was given up to Jemeelah, and an income fully adequate to maintain her as a lady was allotted to her. At first she was grateful and content, but evil was too engrained in her nature to permit her to rest in tranquillity. Forgetful that the royalty of Maarroof was derived from the Princess he had espoused, she at first hated the latter for having alienated (as she chose to consider it) her husband's affection from her, and at last began to hate her very benefactor for not making her his queen. "Had it not been for me, he would have stopped in Cairo, and drudged as a poor mechanic," she would murmur to herself; "yet he never addresses me but with cold courtesy. Ah! if I could only discover where he has hidden the source of his power, the mystic talisman, he should bitterly regret his want of gratitude."

It was probable that its hidden receptacle would be revealed to the heir of the throne; so the crafty woman sought to ingratiate herself with the lad in order to wheedle the secret from him. He did not like her. The innocent experience an innate yet undefinable repugnance to the evil-minded, whilst yet unconscious of their guilt. Never-the-less she succeeded, by slow degrees, in worming the secret from the lad; for what youth can resist the guile of a cunning woman? On his twelfth birthday he had received a small diamond-hilted scimeter, a toy, but an efficient weapon, from his father, and in thanking his parent, said, as he glanced proudly at the slender blade, "I feel some day I shall use it against your enemy."

"I have no enemies, my boy," replied the simple Maarroof; "I never yet wronged man or woman."

It was not long after that birthday, when Jemeelah resolved to make a desperate attempt to acquire the talisman. She knew she was risking her fortunes should she be detected in her crime, but felt assured that her life at least would be spared by her gentle husband. So in the dead of night she traversed the passages that led to the King's apartment, and perceived the secret repository, just as it had been described to her by the boy. Her hand was in the drawer; she felt a large and heavy ring: it surely must be the right one; yet all was dark. She would make sure by the moonlight that was streaming in from the casement of the room she had just passed through. Yes; those were the strange ciphers which none of the possessors of the ring could ever read.

"Now I am the Queen, and Maarroof's master!" she cried in her triumph. It was short-lived, for ere she could rub the ring with the other hand, her head was smitten off by the trenchant blade of a tiny scimeter, and falling to the ground roused the sleeping King from his profound slumber. Sword in hand, he started

from his couch, shouting: for his attendants. The antechamber was tilled in a minute by scores of swarthy slaves, each brandishing a weapon in one hand, and holding aloft a burning taper in the other. The instant blaze of light disclosed a startling sight to the agitated monarch. In his night-clothes with bloody feet and scimeter, stood proudly erect his youthful heir, on the floor beside him lay the decapitated trunk of the former tyrant of his home. For the moment it was inexplicable. But the lad, pointing to the talisman still clutched tightly in the hand of the corpse, cried exultingly, —

“Take it again, my father. I felt I should slay your enemy, and I have slain your only one.”

He had known Jemeeleh’s envy of his mother; he had mistrusted her frequent inquiries about the ring, and when by chance he had beheld her prowling that night on some mysterious errand, he had quietly followed her, and by his well-timed blow had preserved his parents from a terrible future.

Thenceforth Maarooof lived in peace.

FINIS.

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[Previous](#)



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