

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

IV

Of the Poverty and Prosperity of Cogia Hassan the Ropemaker.

Then spoke the caliph to Cogia Hassan the ropemaker, and said unto him, "O Cogia Hassan! on passing thy house yesterday, I marvelled at its beauty, and inquired by whom it was built. I learnt that its owner was a man of an excellent spirit, who had until now followed an occupation which barely supplied him with bread. Tell me, therefore, by what extraordinary means it hath pleased heaven to enrich thee."

Then Cogia Hassan prostrated himself and touched the ground with his forehead; after which he arose and said: "Prince of the Faithful, to the proper understanding of my story, it is necessary that, in the first place, thou shouldst know that there are in Bagdad two men, named Saadi and Saad, bosom friends, to whom, under heaven, I owe all my prosperity."

"Now, Saadi, who is exceedingly rich, early acquired the opinion that great riches are necessary to happiness, and that the only way to acquire them is to have a good capital wherewith to start in life. But Saad, who hath little wealth, and still more moderate desires, was early convinced that gold conferreth not happiness, and that a sufficiency may commonly be attained by most men, if they will but profit by the common accidents and opportunities that come in their way."

"On a certain day, it befel that these two friends were discoursing on this matter as they were passing my rope-walk. Then saith Saad, 'O Saadi, behold, here is a man, whom I have long seen pursuing his trade in poverty. Let us inquire of him a little of the state of his affairs.' Then approaching me with his friend, 'Peace be with thee!' said he. 'I have often noticed thee at thy work, and since thou art laborious, no doubt thy business thrives, and if thou hast not laid by money, thou hast at any rate a good stock of hemp on hand, and art in easy circumstances.' 'Ah, my lord!' returned I, 'would that it were thus with thy servant! I have a wife and five small children, and though I labour continually, I can barely keep them in clothing and bread. Though hemp is not expensive, I am unable to purchase more than I require for immediate Use, otherwise I should be unable to purchase food; but we are content with the little which GOD is pleased to bestow on us, and happy among ourselves.'"

"Said I not so, O Saadi?' whispered Saad. 'This man is peaceful, though poor.' 'But he will never cease to be poor without a lift,' rejoins Saadi. 'Hear me,

O Hassan! What sayest thou, if I give thee two hundred pieces of gold, to enable thee to make a good start in business? Would not such a capital enable thee soon to become as rich as the principal ropemakers?' 'My lord,' said I, 'thou art peradventure diverting thyself at the expense of thy servant. A much smaller sum would doubtless suffice for the purpose.' 'Never-the-less,' said Saadi, 'that sum shalt thou have. Thou wilt find it in this purse; take it, and may God's blessing be on it and thee! Farewell! when next I see thee, may I find thee a rich man!' O caliph! I was struck dumb! My surprise and pleasure were such, that I could only testify my gratitude by seizing the hem of my benefactor's garment to kiss it; but he hastily withdrew it, and departed with his friend."

"The first thing that occurred to me was, where should I put the purse? In my little house I had neither box nor chest with a lock, nor any place of security. In this perplexity, as I had been used, like many poor men, to hide the little I possessed in the folds of my turban, I now placed my purse therein, only taking from it ten pieces of gold, with which I immediately proceeded to buy a good stock of hemp, and a piece of meat for supper."

"I was returning from the market-place with the meat in my hand, thinking how over-joyed my wife and children would be with so unusual a treat, when a ravenous kite darted down at it, and would have carried it off had I not held it fast. Alas! I had better have let it go, for then should I not have lost my purse. The kite, disappointed of the meat, bore away my turban, with the purse in its folds; and my cries, instead of serving to make him drop it, only drew forth my neighbours. When I told them the kite had flown off with my turban, they pitied me; but when I added that the turban contained a purse of gold, they only laughed, and did not believe me. I therefore went home, staying myself with the reflection that I had yet several of my ten pieces left, and a good stock of hemp for my rope-making."

"About six months after this, Saadi and Saad again approached me. 'What, Hassan!' cried Saadi cheerfully, 'still at thy rope-making, and no better clad than of old? How goes thy business?' 'Alas, master!' said I, 'I am as thou seest me, just the same as before. I hid my gold, save ten pieces, in my turban; and a kite flew away with it.' 'This sounds highly improbable,' said Saadi distrustfully. 'I admit it,' replied I, 'yet it is the truth never-the-less.' 'Doubt him not, O Saadi!' said Saad; 'the man is ingenuous, and cases are recorded of kites, equally marvellous with this.' 'I cannot help fearing,' said Saadi, 'that he may have squandered the money, and have invented this story to cover his shame; however, I will try him once again. Here, Hassan, is another purse, containing two hundred pieces; be more careful of it than of the last.'"

"I was ashamed to receive it of him, but he insisted on my doing so, and immediately departed with his friend. This time, I resolved not to hide my purse in my turban; but returning to my house, which happened to be empty, I laid aside ten pieces for present use, and wrapped up the rest in a piece of linen,

which I put at the bottom of a large earthen pot full of bran, which had long been on the shelf with out our having any occasion for it. My wife came in soon afterwards; and as I was nearly destitute of hemp, I told her I was going forth to buy some.”

“In my absence, O caliph, it befell that a seller of Fuller’s Earth, such as women use in the bath, passed through our street, crying it for sale. My wife, wanting some, and having no money, offered him the pot of bran in exchange for some, which he accepted.”

“I returned, laden with as much hemp as I could carry, followed by five porters laden as I was, and I stowed away their burthens and my own in a little out-house I set apart for that purpose. On returning to our kitchen, I sat down to rest, and raised my eyes to the shelf whereon I had set the pot of bran; but, behold! it was no longer there!

“Prince of the Faithful! I cannot express what was my consternation! I hastily asked my wife what had become of it, and she related quite simply what had happened. When I told her, in my trouble, what the earthen pot had contained, she was grievously vexed, and angry with me too. ‘Why didst thou not, my husband,’ cried she, ‘tell me what thou hadst done, at the time? All this results from want of confidence in thy wife. As for the seller of Fuller’s Earth, I know him not by name, nor where to seek him— he never came here before, and may never come again; especially if he hath found the money.’ ‘O wife,’ said I, ‘we must support our misfortune with patience; nor is there any good in communicating it to others. Instead of murmuring, let us be thankful for the ten gold pieces, with some of which I have secured a good stock of hemp, while the remainder will keep us in food for some time.’”

“She submitted with a meek and lowly spirit, though the disappointment must needs have been great; and we went on as before, poor, but content. At the end of another six months, Saadi and Saad again visited me. ‘Peace be with thee, O Hassan!’ said Saadi; ‘art thou a rich man by this time?’ ‘Alas, no, Master!’ replied I; and related unto him what had happened. ‘It may be said,’ I concluded, ‘that I ought not to have put my purse in such a hiding-place, but I had no better; the jar had stood on the shelf for years; we had long had no occasion for bran; and, on former occasions, when my wife had used any, the jar had always remained. Certainly, I should have told my wife of the money, but how could I guess what would happen during so short an absence?’”

“‘I would fain believe thy story, O Hassan,’ said Saadi, ‘but verily it is difficult! I do not regret the loss of my four hundred pieces of gold, but I regret that I have been unable to establish my principle, as I should peradventure have done, had I chosen another man for the experiment. Know, however, O Saad,’ continued he, turning to his friend, ‘that I do not give up my point. This man, with capital, hath failed to become rich; but I will never believe that he may be made rich without it.’ ‘It may be so,’ replied Saad, stooping and picking up a piece of old

lead that lay on the ground; 'however, it is now my turn; and I begin by giving this bit of lead to Hassan, and telling him to use it to the best advantage.' Here upon Saadi laughed immoderately, and cried, 'Pardon me, O Saad! for my rudeness, but the thing is too ridiculous! Of what use can the sixth part of a farthing's worth of lead be to a poor ropemaker?' 'That remains to be seen,' returned Saad; 'take it, Hassan, and despise it not; but watch thine opportunity. May a blessing rest on it and on thee!'"

"Thereupon they departed, leaving me comfortless enough, and deprived of any vague hope I might have entertained of receiving any more money. I carelessly put the lead into my bosom, and returned to my rope-making."

"That night, when I took off my Sash, in preparing to go to bed, the lead, which I had ceased to think of, fell to the ground, I took it up and placed it on the shelf.

"That very night it happened that a neighbour of ours, a poor fisherman, who was sitting up late, mending his nets for the morrow, found he wanted a piece of lead; and as all the shops were shut, he could not buy any. As he meant to go fishing two hours before daylight, for the support of his family, he mentioned his need to his wife, who undertook to inquire among her neighbours if they had a piece of lead wherewith to supply him."

"The first person she applied to was my wife, who was just preparing for her night's rest. The Voices of the two women awoke me; I inquired what was the matter, and sleepily told my wife there was a piece of lead on the shelf, to which my neighbour was welcome."

"The fisherman's wife was very grateful to us for supplying her need. 'I promise you,' said she, as she departed, 'that you shall have all the fish my husband shall catch in the first throw of his nets.' Then she returned and told him what she had said; and he, well pleased to get the lead, was satisfied with her promise."

"The next morning, he brought me a fish about a yard long, saying, 'This is all I caught in my first throw, though afterwards I was more successful; but though I have caught many fish, none of them are so fine as this.' I said, 'I am content, brother. It is of more value to me than the lead, and neighbours should help one another with what they have, and be accommodating, without looking for a return.' Then I gave it to my wife and bade her clean it, and dress it for dinner. She was surprised and full of joy to see so large a fish; but doubted whether she had a kettle large enough to hold it. In cleaning it, she found in its inside a diamond, so large that she supposed it to be a bit of glass, and gave it to the children to play with. Meantime I went to my work, and when I returned to supper, the lamp was lit, and the children were playing in a corner, and making loud exclamations. 'What makes you so noisy, my children?' said I. 'O father!' said the eldest, 'we are diverting ourselves with a bit of glass, which my mother found in the inside of the fish. Before the lamp was lit, it sparkled like fire in the dark,

and even now, it shines brighterst when we turn our backs to the lamp.’ ‘Come,’ said I, ‘let me see it.’ When I beheld it, I was amazed at its brilliancy; but still, in my ignorance of precious stones, supposed it to be only glass. ‘Well,’ said I, ‘this is better than the bit of lead given me by the good Saad, for it will serve us instead of a lamp.’”

“Now, it happened, that my next neighbour was a Jew of penurious habits, who dealt in all sorts of curiosities; and between his house and mine was only a very thin division of lath and plaster. He, hearing perhaps somewhat of our conversation through the wall, sent in his wife the next morning, to say he had been disturbed by our noise. My wife promised it should not occur again, but excused it by saying, that the children had been diverted by a piece of glass she had found within a fish; which, at the Jewess’s request, she showed her. The Jewess straightway perceiving it to be a diamond of the finest water, and surprised at its size, kept her discovery to herself, and returned to her husband, whom she instantly informed of it. He, doubtless thinking it best not to appear too curious about it in the first Instance, sent back his wife to say that as the trifle was pretty, he would give a small price for it. My wife, quickening to some sense of her property on this, asked, ‘How much?’ The Jewess, after a little hesitation, said, ‘Twenty pieces of gold.’ This appeared such a dazzling offer to my wife, that she was tempted to close with it on the instant; but, reflecting that the Jew was considered seldom to give for a thing what it was worth, she, though still quite unconscious of the real value of her treasure, resolved not to part with it till she had spoken to me.”

“I returned to dinner, O caliph, while yet they were talking. My wife immediately told me what had passed; and the Jewess, thinking perhaps, from my countenance, that I did not confider she had offered enough, hastily said, ‘I will give you fifty pieces for it.’”

“This put me on my guard, and I told her she should not have it. ‘Say a hundred pieces, then,’ pursued she, ‘though I am not sure my husband will be pleased at my offering so much,’ ‘He shall not have it for less than a hundred thousand,’ said I shortly; little expecting to be taken at my word, but merely naming that extravagant sum in order to get rid of her, and reflect a little on the subject, before I applied to some jeweller of credit, from whom I might really learn the value of my treasure.”

“The Jewess, startled by my proposition, stopped short, and after a pause, said, ‘I am going beyond my knowledge. But I request of thee, O Hassan, not to part with the stone till my husband has seen thee and treated for it.’”

“This I promised; and when the Jew came in, which was not till night, he examined the diamond, and offered me for it, fifty thousand pieces of gold. But, O caliph, I had meantime considered the matter, and resolved not to grasp at the first offer from so suspicious a character; I therefore remained firm to my declaration that I would not take less than a hundred thousand. He chattered with

me a good while about this; and at last said, 'Sooner than thou shouldest take it to the jeweller's, I will consent to thine extravagant terms; however, I have not at present so much by me in the house, but to-morrow I will raise it among my brethren, and bring it thee as at about this hour; meantime I will at once give thee two thousand pieces as earnest.'"

"My heart fluttered as he produced two bags each containing a thousand pieces, but I betrayed as little emotion as I could. On the following evening, he brought me the remainder of the sum. I delivered to him the diamond; and as soon as he was out of the house, I prostrated myself, and gave thanks to GOD, for having thus unexpectedly raised me from poverty to affluence."

"My wife, whose head grew giddy at so sudden an influx of riches, was impatient to begin spending them in a variety of luxuries. 'It is not in this manner,' said I, 'that we ought to begin, or we shall soon come to the end. Trust to me, O dear wife, and in due season thou shalt have all thou canst need or desire.'"

"The following day, I hired a set of good workmen at my own trade, whom I engaged to work for me in different kinds of ropemaking, for ready money, in proportion to the work they did for me. From day to day, I took on more hands, till I had one of the first businesses in Bagdad. I hired warehouses in different places, and in each warehouse I placed a clerk, as well to receive the work, as to sell it wholesale and retail; and in this way my profits soon became considerable."

"Afterwards, in order to bring my warehouses together, I bought a very large house, occupying a considerable space of ground, but in a very ruinous condition. I pulled it down, and built in its place that which thou, O Prince of the Faithful, observedst yesterday. It comprises within itself warehouses for my trade and an excellent dwelling-house for my family."

"I had not long left my old abode, when the two friends, Saadi and Saad, to whom, after GOD, I owed all my good fortune, again directed their steps to my rope-walk. Finding me no longer there, they inquired what had become of me, and were told I had become a rich man, and were directed to the quarter in which I now live. On their way thither, they amused themselves by various conjectures respecting the origin of my wealth, which Saadi could not for an instant believe was in any way attributable to the piece of lead; nor did Saad feel very hopeful on the subject. Arrived at my new house, they were surprised at its appearance, and thought they must have been misdirected. Saadi, however, knocked at the door, which was opened to him by my porter. 'Are we mistaken,' said Saadi, 'in supposing this to be the house of Cogia Hassan, the ropemaker?' 'You are not mistaken, O my lords!' replied the Porter, who instantly admitted him and his friend. 'My master is in an inner apartment, and if you walk forward, you will find servants ready to present you to him.'"

“When the two friends entered, I rose and ran towards them and kissed the hems of their garments. Then I led them to the sofa whereon I had been sitting, and placed them at the upper end of it.”

“Then Saadi spoke to me and said, ‘O Cogia Hassan! that thou art rich is a matter of rejoicing to us both, but by what means thou hast become so, we are ignorant, and fain would know. Tell me honestly; didst thou not in the first instance, for some reason of thine own, conceal from us the real fate of the gold I gave unto thee, and employ it in trading?’”

“This question troubled Saad, who fixed his eyes on the ground and shook his head; but I made answer, and said, ‘O my lord! I am not surprised that you should be unable to account for my prosperity in any other manner; but be assured that thy servant spake the truth and no lie, with regard to the gold. And as to my present good fortune, I will relate how it has come to pass.’”

“Then I told them the whole narrative, which Saad heard without any appearance of incredulity; but though Saadi congratulated me on my good fortune, I could discern that he still distrusted my veracity. Without being perturbed by it, I said, ‘Suffer me, O my lords! to make known my request unto you, and deny me not. It is, that you will honour me by remaining here to sup and to pass the night; and to-morrow, if it be convenient unto you, we will proceed by water to a country house I have hired on the banks of the Tigris, whence I will bring you back by land the same day, on horses supplied from my own stable.’ They said, ‘Good;’ and I despatched a slave to their several homes, to say they would not return that night; after which we supped, and conversed till it was time to retire to rest.”

“The next morning we embarked before sunrise, in a boat spread with carpets, and manned with six rowers; and the current being in our favour, we reached my country house in about an hour and a half. Then I took my two friends over my house, which was convenient and pleasant; after which we proceeded to the garden, where were orange and citron trees, each watered separately by a little trough of water directly from the river. The shade, the freshness, the singing of numerous birds, delighted them so much, that they continually paused, listened, and looked about them, praising all they saw and heard, and thanking me for bringing them to so delightful a place.”

“At the end of my garden, I showed them a wood of large trees that bounded it, and invited them to enter a pavilion where they might repose on carpets and cushions.

“While we were thus resting, we were joined by my two eldest sons, and the tutor I had provided for them. They had been bird-nesting in the wood; and having discovered a very large nest towards the top of a tree, too high for them to climb, they had shown it to a slave who was following them, and desired him to get it.”

“The slave climbed the tree, and was much astonished to find the nest made in the inside of a man’s turban. He brought it carefully down; and my boys, thinking I should like to see it, brought it to me.

“How surprised was I, O caliph to recognise the old turban which the kite had formerly borne away from me! I asked Saadi and Saad if they had any recollection of the turban I wore, when they first saw me.”

“I do not suppose,’ said Saadi, ‘that Saad paid any more attention to it than I did; but, however, if it be the same, which appears hardly credible, doubtless the hundred and ninety pieces of gold you hid in it will be found in its folds.’ ‘Judge, my lord, by the weight,’ said I, ‘whether it must not be so!’ So saying, I placed the nest in his hand; after which, I proceeded carefully to unwind the linen which formed the turban, and soon drew from it the purse, which Saadi recognised for the one he had given me. As he was not one of those who are angry at being proved mistaken, he sincerely rejoiced at having his suspicions of me cleared up in so wondrous a manner. ‘Since this has turned out to be true,’ said he, ‘I must take on thy word, the account of the manner in which the second purse was lost.’ ‘Believe that or not, as thou wilt,’ interrupted Saad, ‘so long as thou admittest that my piece of lead was the means of Cogia Hassan’s finding the diamond.’ ‘Saad,’ replied Saadi, ‘I will admit what thou wilt, save that a fortune can only be made by starting with a capital.’ ‘What!’ cried Saad, ‘when a hundred thousand pieces of gold have been made by trading with a bit of old lead?’ ‘The lead was his capital,’ said Saadi. Then said Saad, ‘Thou didst not admit that when I gave it him, my brother!’”

“They were growing warm in their dispute, when a slave announced to us that breakfast was prepared; on which we returned to the house. After spending some time in discoursing over our meal, I left my two guests to repose themselves during the heat of the day, and rejoined them at dinner. In the cool of the evening, horses were brought out, and we rode back to Bagdad, which we reached by moonlight.

“I know not by what negligence of my slaves it happened, that there was no corn for my horses, on my return home. The granaries were shut, and would not be re-opened before morning.”

“In this difficulty, my slaves went to the few shops in the neighbourhood that were still open; and at one of them, one of my slaves procured a pot of bran, which he brought away with him, promising to return the empty pot in the morning. He emptied the bran into the manger, and, in spreading it about, that each of the horses might have his share, he felt under his hand a piece of linen tied up and very heavy. He immediately brought it to me, just as he had found it, and, presenting it to me, said that perhaps it might be the linen he had often heard me speak of in relating my story to my friends.

“Immediately, O caliph! I perceived that it was so; and, turning to my two benefactors, I said, ‘O my lords! behold the opportunity offered to me of completely

establishing my word! I recognise this linen rag, and am certain I shall find within it an hundred and ninety pieces of gold!’ Then I untied the rag, and found the money therein, and counted it out before them. And I sent the earthen jar to my wife, to ask if she remembered it. And she knew it for the old jar in which she had been used to keep her bran. Then we all rejoiced; and Saadi said, ‘I give up my point, that money can only be made by money, and I rejoice to find my distrust of Cogia Hassan was needless.’ Then we talked much of the matter, and decided that the three hundred and eighty pieces of gold should be given in alms to the poor. This, O caliph! is my story.”

Then the caliph said, “Verily, it is wonderful. Let it be inscribed in a book. As for the diamond, it is now in my treasury, where Saadi and Saad may see it if they will. O Cogia Hassan! it is long since I have heard anything that has given me as much pleasure as I have derived from thy story. Go thy ways: the blessing of heaven be upon thee, good man! and multiply thy riches, and continue thee in thy good sense, thy gratitude, and thy benevolence.”

Then Cogia Hassan bowed himself to the ground before the caliph, and went his ways. As for the caliph, he mused in his mind a long while on what he had heard; and his sadness departed from him, and his heart dilated.

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