

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

VII.

Of the great Peril and Distress of Gaifar the Barmecide.

It befell that one night the caliph Haroun said unto Gaifar, "We will go down into the city, and observe how affairs are proceeding;" and Gaifar said, "I hear and obey." Therefore they disguised themselves, and went forth, attended by Mesrou; and having passed through several of the market-streets, they proceeded along a lane, where they came up with a poor fisherman going to the river with his net and basket, and singing the following song :

"How full of trouble is the condition and life of the poor!

In summer he fails to earn sufficient food, and in winter he barely warms himself over the firepot!

The dogs follow him wherever he goes, and the tongue of contumely wags against him.

If he states his cause, and proves himself wronged, the judge barely admits his plea."

The caliph, listening to these verses, said to Gaifar, "How hard is the burthen of this poor man! Let us address him." Then speaking to the fisherman, he said, "O friend, what is thine occupation, and what thy success?" "O master," said the poor man, "I am a fisherman, the husband of one wife, and the father of nine children, the youngest of whom is but a few hours old. We live from hand to mouth, in great penury, never knowing how we shall support ourselves on the morrow; and when my wife said to me this morning, 'O husband! find something to fill the children's mouths and make them cease from weeping.' I replied 'I am going forth, relying on the blessing of GOD, whose Name be exalted! for the luck of this new-born child, that we may see its fortune.' Then she replied, 'Place thy dependence upon GOD;' and I took my net, and repaired to the river, and cast it in the name of the little Infant, saying, 'O Allah! make his subsistence easy, not difficult; and abundant, not insufficient!' When I drew in my net, it contained nothing but weeds and rubbish. Then I cast it a second time, and drew it in empty. Then I thought, 'Hath GOD created this new-born little child without intending to provide for it any subsistence? That can never be; for He who created the Jews, created also food wherewith to supply them, and He is merciful, not unrelenting.' Then I cast my net a third time, and drew it in, finding it heavy; and

lo! it contained a dead dog, swollen, and of disgusting odour! Then my heart sunk, and I said, 'I will cast my net no more; it pleaseth GOD for our sins to afflict us.'

Then said the caliph, "O man! GOD never tries us but for some good purpose; and when His judgment seems severe, He is yet providing mercy. return now with us to the river, and cast thy net yet once more; and for whatever it bringeth up, I will give thee an hundred pieces of gold." Then the poor man's heart rejoiced, and he said, "Verily, GOD is good! I thought he would not forget the little one;" and he returned and cast the net, and, having waited till it sank, he drew the cords, and dragged it back, and lo! there came up in it a chest, locked and heavy. Then the caliph gave a hundred pieces of gold to the fisherman, who went on his way, full of gladness; and Gaifar and Mesroure bore the chest to a pavilion in the caliph's garden, where they broke it open, after lighting a lamp. They found in it a large basket of palm-leaves, sewn up with red worsted; and they cut the threads and saw within it a piece of carpet; and they lifted up the carpet, and behold, a woman's Veil; and they opened the veil, and lo! the dead body of a beautiful young woman, white as silver, and hewn in pieces.

When the caliph beheld this, tears burst from his eyes; and turning hastily to his vizier, he said, "Gaifar! I am indignant against thee! Shall people be murdered in my city, and cast into the Tigris, without knowledge and without judgment? This is a miserable departure from justice. To thee it belongeth to have oversight of all; and, by the truth of my descent from Abbas, if thou bring not the murderer of this woman to light, thou must be beheaded, thou, and forty of thy kinsmen!"

"Grant me," said Gaifar, pale as marble, "a delay of three days." "I grant thee the delay," said the caliph. Gaifar then went forth, his head whirling round, and his mind tossed, to think what he could do. He said within himself, "How shall I find the murderer of this woman, and present him to the caliph?" and no method occurred to him. Then he went home, very heavy, and told all his family what had occurred, and they gave him and themselves up for lost. Three days passed without their being able to obtain any tidings of the murderer; and on the fourth day, the caliph's officers came to Gaifar's house and said, "Where is the culprit?"

Gaifar made answer, "My Life for his life. Oh that the caliph would be content therewith, instead of also slaying my kinsmen!" and they all went forth, forty men, two and two, with Gaifar at their head, leaving the house full of wailing. And as soon as they appeared in the streets, the people took up the lamentation and wept bitterly; for Gaifar was in the very prime and flower of his age, a man infinitely beloved, the husband of one wife, the defence of them that were in tribulation, a covert from the sun, and a wall from the tempest, and the Barmecides were of the best lineage in the land; there were none like unto them for uprightness and piety.

Now, when they reached the place of execution, where the axe and the block stood in the square before the caliph's palace, a handsome and well-attired young

man impetuously forced his way through the crowd, and cried to Gaifar, "Safety unto thee and thy kinsmen, O best of viziers! It was I who slew the woman!"

When Gaifar heard this, his heart was stirred, and the hearts of all the people that heard him; and there was a murmur among them like that among pine-tree Tops. And lo! at the same Instant, a venerable old man, well appalled, reached Gaifar, out of breath, crying, "Believe him not, O refuge of the oppressed! it was I who slew the young damsel." "O vizier!" interrupted the young man, "give him no heed, for he is imbecile through age, and knows not what he sayeth; I was the slayer, therefore avenge the death on me!" "O boy, break not mine heart!" cries the old man; "thou hast many years to live, I have ripened and am now withered, and fit to drop into the earth. I shall esteem it a privilege to be a ransom for thee and for the vizier and his kinsmen!" On this, Gaifar was filled with astonishment, and he carried the young man and the old man to the caliph, whose heart was contracted because of his judgment. "O Prince of the Faithful!" said Gaifar, "I bring thee the murderer!" "Who is he?" cried the caliph. "This young man," said Gaifar, "No, I am the murderer," said the old man. "Hear me, O caliph!" cried the young man, "and believe him not. I will confess unto thee the truth from first to last. The slain woman was my wife, the daughter of my uncle, even this old man. I was blessed with three children by her; but about a month ago, she was attacked by a grievous sickness. One day I said unto her, 'Is there anything I can procure for thee, that thou desirest to have, no matter at what cost?' She replied, 'O my love! I am exceedingly thirsty, and there is nothing I incline so much to eat as an apple.' I went out immediately and sought for an apple in the markets and fruiterers' shops, but found none, though I would willingly have given for it its weight in gold. At length I met with an old gardener, who said to me, 'O my son! Apples are rare things, and not to be found, save only in the caliph's gardens at Balsora.' Then I took horse, and journeyed incessantly till I reached Balsora, and procured of thy gardener, O caliph! three apples, for which I paid three pieces of gold; and, without taking rest, I returned with them, riding day and night; and the time of my absence was fifteen days. O Prince of the Faithful! when I carried to my wife the apples which had cost me so much fatigue and expense, her appetite for them was gone; they lay beside her, and she could not eat them.

"After this, her sickness assuage, and her Life was spared, and her health returned. I went forth therefore, and returned to my business, which I had neglected while I was in anxiety about her. As I returned homewards at mid-day, a black slave passed me, having an apple which he was lightly tossing from one hand to the other. I said to him, 'man, where didst thou get that apple?' on which he laughed, and said with levity, 'From whom but from my sweetheart? She had three, which cost three pieces of gold, and I took it from her.' O caliph! I knew it for one of the apples I had brought from Balsora! My heart became swollen and ready to burst, the whole world gathered blackness! This, then, was the reward of my fifteen days' journey for a wife who despised and deceived me, and bestowed

my gifts on another! I entered my house in a rage, and going into her apartment, perceived two apples remaining. I said unto her, 'Where is the third apple?' She looked up, as though in surprise at my emotion, and said carelessly, 'I know not—I had not missed it.' I cried, 'O false of heart!' and, seizing a knife, I drove it into her breast."

"O caliph! I was petrified at what I had done. . . I believed her unworthy, but I felt I had acted too hastily. I knew not where to bestow her body. I cut it in pieces, wrapped it in her veil, covered it with a carpet, sewed it into a basket, placed it in a chest, and cast it into the Tigris. And now I conjure thee, O Prince of the Faithful! to hasten my death in expiation of her murder, lest she appeal for vengeance on me at the day of resurrection. Be it known unto thee, that when I returned home, after casting her body into the Tigris, I found my eldest boy weeping, though he knew not he had lost his mother; and when I said unto him, 'What aileth thee?' he replied, 'I took one of my mother's apples, unknown to her, to play with in the street, and a black slave snatched it from my hand, saying, How camest thou by this? I said, My father gave it to my mother with two others, which he fetched from Balsora, return it to me, I pray thee!' but he laughed, and walked away with it, and I pursued him not, lest he should beat me; but now I fear to return unto my mother, lest she chide me.' O caliph! when I heard this, I went in and lay on the ground, weeping, till my uncle, the father of my wife, returned, when I related to him what had happened. He reproached me not, but bemoaned with me, sitting on the ground beside me day and night, for five days. At the end of that time, we heard that my wife's body was discovered, and that the Barmecides were to suffer death because the slayer could not be found. Wherefore, I surrender myself, and beseech thee to take my life."

The caliph made answer and said, "It were more just to put to death the wicked slave who hath been the cause of all this mischief. Therefore I require him at thy hands, O Gaifar! "Thy life for his life, if thou find him not in three days."

Then Gaifar returned to his house full of heaviness, and when his household heard what had been spoken by the caliph, they renewed their mourning and lamentation. Then said Gaifar unto his wife, "Weep not in mine ears, O Fetnah! otherwise thou only extendest my sorrow. What is written is written; I have escaped from one snare, I may from another; if not, let us not resist what is decreed." Then said Fetnah his wife, "Well saidst thou unto thy mother, that the caliph was as a young lion, that might any moment turn and rend thee. What now is his friendship? As a fountain dried up, and a well without water." Gaifar said, "Speak not, O Fetnah! against the "Prince of the Faithful: he means to be just; but in justice, he forgetteth mercy."

Then, when three days were pass, the caliph's officers came, and said, "Where is the culprit?" Then all the household of Gaifar wept, because the culprit could not be found. Therefore Gaifar prepared to embrace for the last time his mother, his wife, and all his family. Now Gaifar had married Fetnah when he was

about seventeen years old; and she had borne him two daughters; Giahedh, or the Large-eyed, who was now ten years of age, and Soul's Delight, who was but five. This little child but imperfectly understood the danger of her father; and when she was brought into his presence, she darted into his arms as a bird into its nest, full of mirth while all were weeping. He, embracing and kissing her for the last time, with tears in his eyes, felt something hard and round within the folds of her garment. Saith he, "Little one, what is this?" She, kissing his mouth, replied with great glee, "O Father! it is an apple! You shall have it!"— and drew it forth from her bosom. "Who gave it thee?" cried Gaifar. She replied, "Our slave Reyhan— I have had it these six days; he gave it me for two pieces of gold— is it not a nice apple, O my father?" He exclaimed, lifting up his eyes to heaven, "O ready Dispeller of Trouble! How inscrutable Thy remedies!" and then, "Where is Reyhan? go, fetch him immediately." Then Reyhan was brought, and stood trembling. "Whence came this apple?" said Gaifar. "O master!" said Reyhan, falling at his feet, "I went out six days ago, and in the streets saw a little boy playing with it. I snatched it from him in play, and he reviled me and said, 'Give it back to me; wicked, ugly slave! it belongs to my mother, and my father brought it with two others from Balsora.' To tease him, I thought I would keep it a little, and brought it home with me; but the Lady Soul's Delight set her heart upon it, and tempted me to part with it for two pieces of gold."

Then the officers said, "Verily, this is wonderful!" and Gaifar said unto his slave, "Arise, and accompany me to the Prince of the Faithful." When the caliph heard the story, his brow cleared, and he said to Gaifar, "Now thou art free; and thy slave will bear the penalty. How shall I compensate to thee for the pain thou hast suffered?" Gaifar replied, "By granting me the life of my slave, who never, to my knowledge, wronged me or any person before." The caliph said, "Good. Thy request is granted."

And he commanded that the affair should be recorded in a book; and he retained Gaifar about him, and every spoke pleasantly to him, to efface the memory of the past. Also he told Gaifar he was convinced he had acted wisely in this matter, because, by his severity, he had brought the truth to light. Howbeit, Gaifar could not be brought to view it precisely in the same manner.



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