

TALE OF THE WATER FOWL AND THE TORTOISE.

It is related by truthful men, O King, that a certain bird flew high up firmament wards and presently lit on a rock in the midst of water which was running. And as he sat there, behold, the current carried to him the carcass of a man, and lodged it against the rock, for being swollen it floated. The bird, which was a water fowl, drew near and examining it, found that it was the dead body of a son of Adam and saw in it sign of spear and stroke of sword. So he said to himself, "I presume that this man who hath been slain was some evil doer, and that a company banded themselves together against him and put him to death and were at peace from him and his evil doing." And as he continued marvelling at this, suddenly the vultures and kites came down upon the carcass from all sides and get round it; which when the water fowl saw, he feared with sore affright and said, "I cannot abide here any longer." So he flew away in quest of a place where he might wone, till that carcass should come to an end and the birds of prey leave it; and he stayed not in his flight, till he found a river with a tree in its midst. So he alighted on the tree, troubled and distraught and sore grieved for departing from his birth place, and said to himself, "Verily sorrows cease not to follow me: I was at my ease when I saw that carcass, and rejoiced therein with much joy, saying, 'This is a gift of daily bread which Allah hath dealt to me:' but my joy became annoy and my gladness turned to sadness, for the ravenous birds, which are like lions, seized upon it and tare it to pieces and came between me and my prize So how can I hope to be secure from misfortune in this world, or put any trust therein? Indeed, the proverb saith, 'The world is the dwelling of him who hath no dwelling': he who hath no wits is cozened by it and entrusteth it with his wealth and his child and his family and his folk; and whoso is cozened ceaseth not to rely upon it, pacing proudly upon earth until he is laid under earth and the dust is cast over his corpse by him who of all men was dearest to him and nearest. But naught is better for generous youth than patience under its cares and miseries. I have left my native place and it is abhorrent to me to quit my brethren and friends and loved ones." Now whilst he was thus musing lo! a male tortoise descended into the river and, approaching the water fowl, saluted him, saying, "O my lord, what hath exiled thee and driven thee so far from thy place?" Replied the water fowl, "The descent of enemies thereon; for the wise brooketh not the neighbourhood of his foe; and how well saith the poet,

'Whenas on any land the oppressor doth alight, *

There's nothing left for those, that dwell therein, but flight.'"[FN#149]

Quoth the tortoise, "If the matter be as thou sayest and the case as thou describest, I will not leave thee nor cease to stand before thee, that I may do thy need and fulfil thy service; for it is said that there is no sorer desolation than that of him who is an exile, cut off from friends and home; and it is also said that no calamity equalleth that of severance from the good; but the best solace for men of understanding is to seek companionship in strangerhood and be patient under sorrows and adversity. Wherefore I hope that thou wilt approve of my company, for I will be to thee a servant and a helper." Now when the water fowl heard the tortoise's words he answered, "Verily, thou art right in what thou sayest for, by my life, I have found grief and pain in separation, what while I have been parted from my place and sundered from my brethren and friends; seeing that in severance is an admonition to him who will be admonished and matter of thought for him who will take thought. If the generous youth find not a companion to console him, weal is forever cut off from him and ill

is eternally established with him; and there is nothing for the sage but to solace himself in every event with brethren and be constant in patience and endurance: indeed these two are praiseworthy qualities, and both uphold one under calamities and vicissitudes of the world and ward off startling sorrows and harrowing cares, come what will." Rejoined the tortoise, "Beware of sorrow, for it will spoil thy life and waste thy manliness." And the two gave not over conversing till the bird said, "Never shall I cease fearing the shifts of time and vicissitudes of events." When the tortoise heard this, he came up to him and, kissing him between the eyes, said to him, "Never may the company of the birds cease to be blest in thee and through thee, and find wisdom in thy good counsel! How shalt thou be burdened with care and harm?" And he went on to comfort the water fowl and soothe his terrors till he became reassured. Then he flew to the place where the carcass was and found on arriving there the birds of prey gone, and they had left nothing of the body but bones; whereupon he returned to the tortoise and acquainted him with the fact that the foe had disappeared from his place, saying, "Know that of a truth I long for return homewards to enjoy the society of my friends; for the sage cannot endure separation from his native place." So they both went thither and found naught to affright them; whereupon the water fowl began repeating,

"And haply whenas strait descends on lot of generous youth *
Right sore, with Allah only lies his issue from annoy:
He's straitened, but full oft when rings and meshes straitest clip, *
He 'scapes his strait and joyance finds, albe I see no joy."

So the twain abode in that island; and while the water fowl was enjoying a life of peace and gladness, suddenly Fate led thither a hungry falcon, which drove its talons into the bird's belly and killed him, nor did caution avail him when his term of life was ended. Now the cause of his death was that he neglected to use the formula of praise, and it is said that his form of adoration was as follows, "Praised be our Lord in that He ordereth and ordaineth; and praised be our Lord in that He enricheth and impoverisheth!" Such was the waterfowl's end and the tale of the ravenous birds. And when it was finished quoth the Sultan, "O Shahrazad, verily thou overwhelmest me with admonitions and salutary instances. Hast thou any stories of beasts?" "Yes," answered she, and began to tell the

[FN#401] Arab. "Al-Shahádatáni"; testifying the Unity and the Apostleship.