

PROVERBIAL ROMANCES.

1. THE MERCHANT AND THE ROBBER.

A merchant, having charge of a very valuable jewel, was travelling for safety in the garb of a beggar, when he was set upon by three robbers who demanded of him the stone.

Perceiving that his assailants were aware of his secret, he said to them "Why should three of you wish to be hanged for a robbery that a single one of you could accomplish; or why should three of you come to take that which can only make one of you happy?"

They answered him "We are not going to be hanged: we shall sell the jewel and divide the proceeds equally between us."

"You seem to be very honest fellows," said the merchant, "but you are none the less fools! This jewel belongs to my master, the Emperor; and assuredly I shall inform him of how you have robbed me."

"You will not!" they replied, "for before we part you will be dead."

"Whether I am to die or not will be presently revealed," answered the merchant, "for that is in the hands of Allah: but it grieves me that all three of you should seek to stain your souls with the crime of killing me. Therefore I will

give up this jewel to that one of you alone who will refrain from adding my murder to the list of his iniquities."

As he said this, the merchant perceived the gentlest of the robbers twitching an open palm towards him. Throwing to him the jewel, he said: "Take it and run, and may Allah reward you for your mercy!"

The robber having the jewel in possession fled, pursued by the other two, who presently came up with him. The conflict which ensued was watched by the merchant with interest. Many hard blows were exchanged ere the gentle robber came off exhausted but victorious leaving the other two dead upon the ground.

Then the merchant advanced towards him with a bold front and demanded the restoration of the jewel. The gentle robber, seeing himself now weakened by wounds, and the merchant strong, made no difficulty about returning the stolen property.

"Your shameless greed has saved my life," said the merchant, "but it is not well in the eyes of Allah that you should go unpunished." Having said so, he bound his preserver to a tree and bastinadoed him unsparingly. "One feels no gratitude," he added, "to those who benefit us by the exercise of ill-gotten power."

"I should think," wept the gentle robber as the merchant was departing, "that you must be an Emperor yourself to play such a high and mighty mean trick on one whom you yourself led into temptation!"

2. THE KING AND THE PHILOSOPHER.

A certain King happening to be bound on a private adventure which required not only secrecy and discretion, but two persons to handle it with ease and comfort, took with him a learned slave, in whose fidelity and sagacity he had the utmost confidence. The King having instructed his companion as to the affair in hand, the philosophic one perceived that his presence and assistance were absolutely necessary for the King's comfort and safety.

Therefore, as they were crossing by a narrow footbridge a torrent, considerably swollen by rains, the slave folded his arms, committed himself to the favour of God, and projected himself into the flood below.

The King perceiving his slave about to be snatched from him at a time highly inconvenient for his own person, and learning by hasty enquiry that the Philosopher had only a book-knowledge of swimming, plunged selfishly to the rescue.

To his surprise he found that all the rudiments of swimming which the Philosopher possessed, were being employed by him to escape the life-saving clutches which his master was directing towards him. As often as the monarch caught hold of a garment, the Philosopher quitted it with the agility of an acrobat. "Your majesty," said he, "may succeed in undressing me, but you shall not succeed in saving me!"

"How is this?" asked the King, "have you no gratitude

for the efforts I am making on your behalf ? ”

“ I am your majesty’s property ” said the Philosopher, “ and the efforts you make interest me, but do not excite my gratitude. Yet I am flattered to see the value you put upon the head of one so unworthy. ” “ What ” cried the King, “ is the object you have behind your present evasion of my wishes ? ”

“ I am determined, ” answered the other, “ that death is preferable to slavery, even to the kindest of masters ; and I will only give myself up into your majesty’s hands on condition that you restore to me my liberty. ”

The King, having no other course open, consented to the Philosopher’s terms, and ratified the same with an oath. The Philosopher then committed himself to the King’s arms, and they presently came to land in safety at a point some five miles further down the stream, than that at which the controversy between them had begun.

Without any further dispute they continued their adventure together, in the course of which the Philosopher proved himself many times essential to the King’s comfort and safety.

On their return to the capital the King caused a document to be drawn up restoring to the Philosopher his liberty. But the next day, the monarch, who had caught a violent cold from his long immersion in the water, gave orders for the head of his new freeman to be cut off. By which it may be seen that with kings an oath is an instrument which may easily lose its point, whereas freedom is a weapon which kings also can handle, cutting both ways.

3. THE POET AND HIS MISTRESS.

In hell, amongst all the company of gallants and gay ladies there tossing and turning to get rid of the torment of their hot bodies, one woman sat alone and smiled. She bore herself with the air of a listener, lifting her head now and then as though some voice from above attracted her.

“Who is yonder woman?” enquired a new-comer, dazzled by her exceeding beauty, “the one with smooth ivory limbs and red hair falling through her arms and on to her lap? She is the only soul here whose eyes are ever looking aloft; what skeleton does she keep in the cupboard of God up yonder?”

“They say,” one made haste to answer, “that she was a great singer in her day, with a voice like a falling star in a clear sky; and that when she came here to meet her doom, God took her voice from her and cast it to the eternal echoes of the spheres, finding it too beautiful a thing to let die. So now she hears it with recognition, and shares still the pleasure that God takes in it. Do not speak to her, for she believes that she is in Heaven.”

“No, that is not her story,” said another.

“What, then?”

“It is this: On earth a poet made his song of her, so that her name became eternally wedded to his verse, which still rings on the lips of men. Now she lifts her head and hears his praise of her eternally going on wherever language is

spoken."

"Did she love him well?"

"So little that here and now she passes him daily, and does not recognise his face!"

"And he?"

The other laughed and answered: "It is he who just now told you that tale concerning her voice, continuing here the lies which he used to make about her when they two were on earth!"

4. THE KING AND HIS WORD.

A certain King became greatly enamoured of a lady whose beauty was such that it dazzled all beholders. Therefore he desired to make her his wife.

She, however, would have none of him. "I know too well," said she, "what fate awaits all beautiful women who marry kings; for a while they are loved with trust, then they are loved with jealousy; then, for no cause at all, their beautiful heads are taken off them and piled on a dish before the King to be regarded merely as the fruits of experience."

The King was ready to protest all faith in her, but she stopped his lips. "Nay," said she, "unless you swear to me by Heaven and by Hell, by your honour among men, and your soul's safety hereafter, also by the tombs of your ancestors, that you will do me no hurt except you yourself discover me

in an act of unfaithfulness towards you, I will not accept the peril of this honour which you thrust on me."

So the King swore by Heaven and by Hell, by his honour and by his soul, and by the tombs of his ancestors, giving her the oath in writing sealed with the royal signet. And she, for her part gave him her promise that she would be faithful to him while life lasted.

So they were married, and in no long time the King began to be devoured by the pangs of jealousy, eating daily the bread of doubt, and drinking the waters of suspicion. Never dared he let himself go from her side, save it were when he went yearly to worship and fast at the tombs of his ancestors, to which no woman, not the Queen herself, might go.

In vain did he surround her with guards, and set spies of his most trusted servants to bring him word of her doings, no slur or stain could any of them cast on the Queen's honour; and all the more did the absence of rumour inflame his jealousy. He believed that her beauty had beguiled all men into her service against him; nay, at last he suspected that every man who failed to bring word crediting her with dishonour must be himself a partner in the offence; so there were many executions done in those days in solemn sacrifice to the Queen's beauty.

Forty-nine times he bore to the verge of madness the weight of jealousy that came at each time of ceremonial absence; for the passing of years made no diminution in the Queen's loveliness.

On the fiftieth anniversary, when the days of sacred fasting and seclusion called for him, beseeching forgiveness of Heaven, he turned back secretly from the tombs of his ancestors, nor stayed the set time; for now his will mounted to madness that he would have proof for his jealousy and release from his royal oath which made him refrain from the word for her death. Therefore, with great subtlety, the King put on the disguise of a merchant, staining his face and hands, and letting no mark on his person show by which he might be known. Then he took with him jewels of great price, and coming to the palace caused himself to be led into the presence of the Queen.

She, seeing such wonders, was willing to give all the wealth she had to get possession of them. But the King had left her with a small purse, and the price he now asked was fabulous. When she informed him that this was beyond her, he answered softly, "There is another price, O fairest of all fair women, that can only be asked in secret."

Then she put all forth from her and said, "Thou would'st come into my chamber to ask me that?" "Even so," said he. And she answered, "Give me the jewels: whatever it is I grant it before the asking." Then she retired from him for a while, but afterwards returned, and she led him in; and they were together, and all doors closed.

About midnight she said to him, "My lord, forty-nine times thou hast returned to me in disguise; yet is it only at this fiftieth time that I have discovered thee!"

Then the King rose, and drawing forth his sword, cried, "Now out of thine own mouth hast thou released me, and given me back my royal word, to do to thee as thou deservest." And so saying he struck off her head.

On the morrow when the King sat in state, and the Queen's death was noised in whispers through the palace, there came to him a slave that had been in the Queen's service, bearing a small coffer and weeping. "Oh, my lord," said the slave, "yesterday while you were yet absent, the Queen gave me this, and bade me lay it before the King's feet on his return, telling him how great was her sorrow that she had not herself power now to be its bearer."

Wondering, the King took the casket. In it lay his own written word sealed and signed, and beside it another scroll, which, opening, he read: "O Lord, to kill and to make alive, when thou receivest this thou art without honour on earth and without soul in Heaven, for I shall be dead by thy hand, not having been found by thee in any act of unfaithfulness soever. For neither in body or in spirit was there deceit in me, seeing that I beheld thee through thy disguise. As for that which I told thee, truly thou hast returned to me forty-nine times disguised as a King; only this fiftieth time have I known thee certainly for the dust thou art. And since my beauty, through thy jealousy brought death to many, it is better that I only should die, who have become over-weary of my bondage to such an one as thee. So now I beg thee, who art without honour or soul, for the little time that is left thee, have pity

upon others whose life thou would'st cut in half."

The King read: and straightway he ordered to be struck off, the head of the slave who had brought him the Queen's message; for though by his oath he had neither honour nor soul left, he remembered that he was still a King.

5. THE ROSE AND THE THORN.

A certain Commander of the Faithful, had as the Favourite of his harem, a lady more beautiful than all the stars and their moons about them,—but with a shrew's tongue. The pathway to her favour lay through torrents of abuse, which cast him without dignity and crownless before her imperious feet. But, none the less, love of her mastered him so greatly that he looked on no other woman with any concern.

After many sleepless nights and days without rest, he hardly knew whether he were the most cursed or the most blessed of mortals; for truly his vigils gave him the continual consciousness of her charms, though all the while her mouth was like the crater of a volcano in eruption pouring out lava of vituperation upon his head.

One day his chief chamberlain, beholding him nursing a sick headache, said, "Why, O shadow of God, dost thou continue to endure this evil, seeing that He hath made thee the master of all things? If the Light of the harem were tongueless, she were perfect. Therefore give orders, O Commander of the Faithful, and it shall be seen to!"

So presently the counsel of the chief chamberlain took effect, and the Favourite's mouth became as a dove's for quietness. But now the Sultan found that his love for her was altogether flown; her beauty seemed to him flavourless and insipid; and all desire for her favours grew drowsy for lack of the naggings wherewith she had been wont so constantly to assail him.

Then he saw that her way with him had been one of pure reason and beneficence. Seeing that Kings, having through their high estate to be left uncorrected in other matters, have need to be corrected to their appetites, by goadings and thwartings which are not necessary for the less spoiled children of fortune.

And because of his deep grief, the Sultan sacked the chief chamberlain, and sought through all his dominions till he found another woman less fair, but gifted in like measure with a shrewishness of tongue to take the place of his lost Favourite.

6. THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS SOUL.

A certain traveller, passing through the slums of a great city, came there upon a man whose countenance indicated a grief which he could not fathom. The traveller, being a curious student of the human heart, stopped him and said: "Sir, what is this grief which you carry before the eyes of all men, so grievous that it cannot be hidden, yet so deep that it

cannot be read?

The man answered: "It is not I who grieve so greatly, it is my soul, of which I cannot rid me. And my soul is more sorrowful than death, for it hates me, and I hate it."

The traveller said "If you will sell your soul to me you can be well rid of it." The other answered: "Sir, how can I sell you my soul?" "Surely," replied the traveller, "you have but to agree to sell me your soul at its full price, then, when I bid it, it comes to me. But every soul has its true price; and only at that, neither at more nor at less, can it be bought."

Then said the other: "At what price shall I sell you this horrible thing, my soul?"

The traveller answered: "When a man first sells his own soul he is like that other betrayer; therefore its price should be thirty pieces of silver. But after that, if it passes to other hands, its value becomes small; for to others the souls of their fellow-men are worth very little."

So for thirty pieces of silver the man sold his soul, and the traveller took it and departed.

Presently the man, having no soul, found that he could do no sin. Though he stretched out his arms to sin, sin would not come to him. "You have no soul," said sin, and passed him by. "Wherefore should I come to you? I have no profit in a man that has no soul?"

Then the man without a soul became very miserable, for though his hands touched what was foul they remained clean,

and though his heart longed for wickedness it remained pure ; and when he thirsted to dip his lips in fire they remained cool.

Therefore a longing to recover his soul took hold of him, and he went through the world searching for the traveller to whom he had sold it, that he might buy it back and again taste sin in his own body.

After a long time the traveller met him, but hearing his request he laughed and said : " After a while your soul wearied me, and I sold it to a Jew for a smaller sum than I paid for it."

" Ah ! " cried the man, " if you had come to me I would have paid more." The traveller answered : " You could not have done that ; a soul cannot be bought or sold but at its just price. Your soul came to be of small value in my keeping, so to be rid of it I sold it to the first comer for considerably less money than I paid in the beginning."

So parting from him the man continued his quest, wandering over the face of the earth and seeking to recover his lost soul. And one day as he sat in the bazaar of a certain town a woman passed him, and looking at him said : " Sir, why are you so sad ? It seems to me there can be no reason for such sadness." The man answered : " I am sad because I have no soul, and am seeking to find it."

The other said : " Only the other night I bought a soul that had passed through so many hands that it had become dirt-cheap ; but it is so poor a thing I would gladly be rid of it. Yet I bought it for a mere song ; and a soul can only be sold at its just price ; how, then, shall I be able to sell it again—for

what is worth less than a song? And it was but a light song that I sang over the wine-cup to the man who sold it me."

When the other heard that he cried: "It is my own soul! Sell it to me, and I will give you all that I possess!"

The woman said: "Alas, I did but pay for it with a song, and I can but sell it again at its just price. How then can I be rid of it, though it cries and laments to be set free?"

The man without a soul laid his head to the woman's breast, and heard within it the captive soul whimpering to be set free, to return to the body it had lost. "Surely," he said, "it is my own soul!" If you will sell it to me I will give you my body, which is worth less than a song from your lips."

So, for his body, the other sold to him the soul that whimpered to be set free to return to its own place. But so soon as he received it he rose up aghast: "What have you done?" he cried, "and what is this foul thing that has possession of me? For this soul that you have given me is not my soul!"

The woman laughed and said: "Before you sold your soul into captivity it was a free soul in a free body; can you not recognise it now it comes to you from the traffic of the slave-market? So, then, your soul has the greater charity, since it recognises and returns to you, though you have sold your body miserably into bondage!"

And thus it was that the man had to buy back at the cost of his body the soul which he let go for thirty pieces of silver.

7. FATHER AND SON.

There was once a young man of left-handed parentage, who, from his birth had been seized with an unnatural desire to redress in the punishment of his father the wrong done to his mother. She indeed had been the victim of a betrayal cruel enough to arouse more than ordinary resentment. But she was of a mild and forgiving disposition, and the only act of self-assertion she allowed herself, was to die in giving her son birth.

With just so much assistance from her as that, the son started on life equipped with all the passionate and unforgiving qualities of his other parent.

From the days when he could first toddle, his aim was to wreak vengeance on the man whose cruelty and neglect had made him at once a bastard and an orphan.

So soon as he was grown up to independence, his years of indiscretion began, and he started nosing among the garbage of humanity for a clue to his father's whereabouts.

Presently getting wind of him, the son almost had him in hand had not his parent, pricked by a guilty conscience, got himself hurriedly to a place of concealment and safety.

Again pursued, he took flight into the next hemisphere. The world watching beheld a breathless hide-and-seek going on between the pair, so that after a few years the weary life

his son caused him to lead, forced the father into a certain measure of repentance which would not otherwise have occurred to him. Thus it came about that finally he died in something like the odour of sanctity, respectably attended by priest and doctor.

His son arrived only in time to curse the doctor for having precipitated a catastrophe which a lifetime of wrathful sun-settings had taught him to regard as his own perquisite. He returned home sadly and hanged himself to his mother's grave-stone, trusting to be permitted in the next world to carry out the interrupted project of vengeance which was now his one passion.

In hell he was greatly delighted to find that the law still permitted and encouraged the pursuit of vengeance; and for a good while he found some enjoyment running about in search of the man he wished to devour.

After weeks of a species of fiery slumming in the lowest quarter of the infernal regions, he received from the Devil a kindly word of enlightenment. "My poor child," said he "do you not know that, thanks to you, your father made a penitent ending, and in consequence is receiving his reward in a better place than this?"

For the first time the revengeful soul thirsted with despair, perceiving the gulf fixed. "Now I know that I am in hell," said he with conviction, "since I cannot give that man of sin the dubbing he deserves."

Castling about in his mind—"And my mother?" he added

presently.

“Poor, forgiving little thing!” said the Devil compassionately, “I have not the heart to grudge her her present happiness. While you were on earth threatening perdition to the man she loved, she had a devil of a time of it, but your arrival here transported her to the seventh heaven.”

8. THE PRINCE AND HIS TWO MISTRESSES.

A certain Prince had a mistress, of whom, after many years he began to tire, finding her exceeding faithfulness to him grow wearisome. So beginning to neglect his former passion, and having lighted on a new love of deeper complexion and more to his present taste, he made a song in praise of her beauty.

“After day” he sang, “comes night, and the moon lifts up her face; after red locks dark locks have hold on me!”

Before long his former mistress observing that his ardour slackened, found where her felicity had flown to; and without haste took counsel with herself how to regain the lost place which her jealousy and devotion still coveted.

Presently on his visits to his new mistress, the Prince began to recognise certain jewels adorning her person, which he had bestowed in other days on the one who had then crowned his fancy. “Whence came these?” he began enquir-

ing, after searching vainly in his own mind for a solution.

For a while his new lady-love sought to evade his questions ; but when she could no more put him off (while she needs must flaunt the trinkets as more and more of them came into her possession), she answered : “ There is a certain skew-eyed and faded creature, a poor broken-down old troll, who comes and drops these on me at times. And her tale is of the strangest ; but as I profit by her madness I let it go. And what she says to me is this : ‘ One of the many who have long wearied me with their love is now your lover ; and that is well, since it leaves me free to follow my own liking. Therefore, I pray you bind him close to you and keep him from troubling me further ; and every time that you receive him I, in thankfulness to be rid of him, will bring you a token of my gratitude, which I hold well earned, since then I can be in the arms of the lover I love truly.’ This is her story, and truly I have reaped profit out of it, for each time you visit me she brings me a fresh jewel. Why, then, should I laugh in the face of the poor thing who is happy in her folly ? ”

But when he had considered the matter well, the Prince left her, and went back to his former mistress.

9. TWO KINGS AND THEIR QUEENS.

Two Kings, who bore rule over adjoining territories having come together amicably, in state and with a great

retinue, for the settlement of a disputed question of boundaries, became greatly enamoured each of the other's consort.

While in public they were defining one boundary amicably from day to day, each in secret was plotting how another boundary might be over-stepped. The Queens, finding themselves royally pursued, remained demure, but put their heads together for a friendly purpose by stealth, not wishing to disturb the political situation.

So presently, by the aid of chamberlains and ladies of honour, all ready to take bribes at cross-purposes, the game grew hot ; virtuous protestation died on the Queens' lips, and the monarchs came each to the belief that he had, without knowledge of the other, secured an assignation which would overwhelm his infelicity.

A hunting expedition, and a certain mis-arrangement of the pavilions destined for the separated repose of royalty, gave the occasion and the means ; the Kings beheld a way pointed to them, more plainly than by any star in the East, for the consummation of their desires.

What was the chagrin of the two monarchs on awakening to the light of reason after an experience which had made each believe himself the most blest of mortals, to find that they had fallen into a lawful embrace, and had deceived themselves with the decorous bonds of matrimony.

The ladies themselves put a quiet countenance on the matter, and were astonished when presently they lost their two heads for the crime of being found in the embraces of

their own true lords, time not being given them to make the mathematical calculation by which their judges arrived at a conviction of their intended guiltiness.

Whether, indeed, those lords signed their death-warrants as thieves defrauded of their booty, or as owners finding their possession threatened, only kings themselves can decide. But it is sometimes more dangerous to force kings into the paths of virtue than to attract them into the ways of vice.

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