

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE SHAVING OF
SHAGPAT; AN ARABIAN
ENTERTAINMENT.

VOLUME 1

George Meredith

**The Shaving of Shagpat; an
Arabian entertainment. Volume 1**

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The Shaving of Shagpat; an Arabian entertainment – Volume 1

THE THWACKINGS

It was ordained that Shibli Bagarag, nephew to the renowned Baba Mustapha, chief barber to the Court of Persia, should shave Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor, the son of Shoolpi, the son of Shullum; and they had been clothiers for generations, even to the time of Shagpat, the illustrious.

Now, the story of Shibli Bagarag, and of the ball he followed, and of the subterranean kingdom he came to, and of the enchanted palace he entered, and of the sleeping king he shaved, and of the two princesses he released, and of the Afrite held in subjection by the arts of one and bottled by her, is it not known as 'twere written on the finger-nails of men and traced in their corner-ropes? As the poet says:

Ripe with oft telling and old is the tale,
But 'tis of the sort that can never grow stale.

Now, things were in that condition with Shibli Bagarag, that on a certain day he was hungry and abject, and the city of Shagpat the clothier was before him; so he made toward it, deliberating as to how he should procure a meal, for he had not a dirhem in his girdle, and the remembrance of great dishes and savoury ingredients were to him as the illusion of rivers sheening on the sands to travellers gasping with thirst.

And he considered his case, crying, 'Surely this comes of wandering, and 'tis the curse of the inquiring spirit! for in Shiraz, where my craft is in favour, I should be sitting now with my uncle, Baba Mustapha, the loquacious one, cross-legged, partaking of seasoned sweet dishes, dipping my fingers in them, rejoicing my soul with scandal of the Court!'

Now, he came to a knoll of sand under a palm, from which the yellow domes and mosques of the city of Shagpat, and its black cypresses, and marble palace fronts, and shining pillars, and lofty carven arches that spanned half-circles of the hot grey sky, were plainly visible. Then gazed he awhile despondingly on the city of Shagpat, and groaned in contemplation of his evil plight, as is said by the poet:

The curse of sorrow is comparison!
As the sun casteth shade, night showeth star,
We, measuring what we were by what we are,
Behold the depth to which we are undone.

Wherefore he counselleth:

Look neither too much up, nor down at all,
But, forward stepping, strive no more to fall.

And the advice is excellent; but, as is again said:

The preacher preacheth, and the hearer heareth,

But comfort first each function requireth.

And 'wisdom to a hungry stomach is thin pottage,' saith the shrewd reader of men. Little comfort was there with Shibli Bagarag, as he looked on the city of Shagpat the clothier! He cried aloud that his evil chance had got the better of him, and rolled his body in the sand, beating his breast, and conjuring up images of the profusion of dainties and the abundance of provision in Shiraz, exclaiming, 'Well-a-way and woe's me! this it is to be selected for the diversion of him that plotteth against man.' Truly is it written:

On different heads misfortunes come:
One bears them firm, another faints,
While this one hangs them like a drum
Whereon to batter loud complaints.

And of the three kinds, they who bang the drum outnumber the silent ones as do the billows of the sea the ships that swim, or the grains of sand the trees that grow; a noisy multitude.

Now, he was in the pits of despondency, even as one that yieldeth without further struggle to the waves of tempest at midnight, when he was ware of one standing over him,—a woman, old, wrinkled, a very crone, with but room for the drawing of a thread between her nose and her chin; she was, as is cited of them who betray the doings of Time,

Wrinkled at the rind, and overripe at the core,

and every part of her nodded and shook like a tree sapped by the waters, and her joints were sharp as the hind-legs of a grasshopper; she was indeed one close-wrecked upon the rocks of Time.

Now, when the old woman had scanned Shibli Bagarag, she called to him,

'O thou! what is it with thee, that thou rollest as one reft of his wits?'

He answered her, 'I bewail my condition, which is beggary, and the lack of that which filleth with pleasantness.'

So the old woman said, 'Tell me thy case.'

He answered her, 'O old woman, surely it was written at my birth that I should take ruin from the readers of planets. Now, they proclaimed that I was one day destined for great things, if I stood by my tackle, I, a barber. Know then, that I have had many offers and bribes, seductive ones, from the rich and the exalted in rank; and I heeded them not, mindful of what was foretold of me. I stood by my tackle as a warrior standeth by his arms, flourishing them. Now, when I found great things came not to me, and 'twas the continuance of sameness and satiety with Baba Mustapha, my uncle, in Shiraz,—the tongue-wagger, the endless tattler,—surely I was advised by the words of the poet to go forth in search of what was wanting, and he says:

"Thou that dreamest an Event,
While Circumstance is but a waste of sand,
Arise, take up thy fortunes in thy hand,
And daily forward pitch thy tent."

Now, I passed from city to city, proclaiming my science, holding aloft my tackle. Wullahy! many adventures were mine, and if there's some day propitiousness in fortune, O old woman, I'll tell thee of what befell me in the kingdom of Shah Shamshureen: 'tis wondrous, a matter to draw down the lower jaw with amazement! Now, so it was, that in the eyes of one city I was honoured and in request, by reason of my calling, and I fared sumptuously, even as a great officer of state surrounded by slaves, lounging upon clouds of silk stuffs, circled by attentive ears: in another city there was no beast so base as I. Wah! I was one hunted of men and an abomination; no housing for me, nought

to operate upon. I was the lean dog that lieth in wait for offal. It seemeth certain, O old woman, that a curse hath fallen on barbercraft in these days, because of the Identical, whose might I know not. Everywhere it is growing in disrepute; 'tis languishing! Nevertheless till now I have preserved my tackle, and I would descend on yonder city to exercise it, even for a livelihood, forgetting awhile great things, but that I dread men may have changed there also,—and there's no stability in them, I call Allah (whose name be praised!) to witness; so should I be a thing unsightly, subject to hateful castigation; wherefore is it that I am in that state described by the poet, when,

"Dreading retreat, dreading advance to make,
Round we revolve, like to the wounded snake."

Is not my case now a piteous one, one that toucheth the tender corner in man and woman?'

When she that listened had heard him to an end, she shook her garments, crying, 'O youth, son of my uncle, be comforted! for, if it is as I think, the readers of planets were right, and thou art thus early within reach of great things—nigh grasping them.'

Then she fell to mumbling and reciting jigs of verse, quaint measures; and she pored along the sand to where a line had been drawn, and saw that the footprints of the youth were traced along it. Lo, at that sight she clapped her hands joyfully, and ran up to the youth, and peered in his face, exclaiming, 'Great things indeed! and praise thou the readers of planets, O nephew of the barber, they that sent thee searching the Event thou art to master. Wullahy! have I not half a mind to call thee already Master of the Event?'

Then she abated somewhat in her liveliness, and said to him, 'Know that the city thou seest is the city of Shagpat, the clothier, and there's no one living on the face of earth, nor a soul that requireth thy craft more than he. Go therefore thou, bold of heart, brisk, full of the sprightliness of the barber, and enter to him. Lo, thou'lt see him lolling in his shop-front to be admired of this people—marvelled at. Oh! no mistaking of Shagpat, and the mole might discern Shagpat among myriads of our kind; and enter thou to him gaily, as to perform a friendly office, one meriting thanks and gratulations, saying, "I will preserve thee the Identical!" Now he'll at first feign not to understand thee, dense of wit that he is! but mince not matters with him, perform well thy operation, and thou wilt come to great things. What say I? 'tis certain that when thou hast shaved Shagpat thou wilt have achieved the greatest of things, and be most noteworthy of thy race, thou, Shibli Bagarag, even thou! and thou wilt be Master of the Event, so named in anecdotes and histories and records, to all succeeding generations.'

At her words the breast of Shibli Bagarag took in a great wind, and he hung his head a moment to ponder them; and he thought, 'There's provokingness in the speech of this old woman, and she's one that instigateth keenly. She called me by my name! Heard I that? 'Tis a mystery!' And he thought, 'Peradventure she is a Genie, one of an ill tribe, and she's luring me to my perdition in this city! How if that be so?' And again he thought, 'It cannot be! She's probably the Genie that presided over my birth, and promised me dower of great things through the mouths of the readers of planets.'

Now, when Shibli Bagarag had so deliberated, he lifted his sight, and lo, the old woman was no longer before him! He stared, and rubbed his eyes, but she was clean gone. Then ran he to the knolls and eminences that were scattered about, to command a view, but she was nowhere visible. So he thought, "'Twas a dream!' and he was composing himself to despair upon the scant herbage of one of those knolls, when as he chanced to gaze down the city below, he saw there a commotion and a crowd of people flocking one way; he thought, "'Twas surely no dream? come not Genii, and go they not, in the fashion of that old woman? I'll even descend on yonder city, and try my tackle on Shagpat, inquiring for him, and if he is there, I shall know I have had to do with a potent spirit. Allah protect me!'

So, having shut together the clasps of resolve, he arose and made for the gates of the city, and entered it by the principal entrance. It was a fair city, the fairest and chief of that country; prosperous,

powerful; a mart for numerous commodities, handicrafts, wares; round it a wild country and a waste of sand, ruled by the lion in his wrath, and in it the tiger, the camelopard, the antelope, and other animals. Hither, in caravans, came the people of Oolb and the people of Damascus, and the people of Vatz, and they of Bagdad, and the Ringheez, great traders, and others, trading; and there was constant flow of intercourse between them and the city of Shagpat. Now as Shibli Bagarag paced up one of the streets of the city, he beheld a multitude in procession following one that was crowned after the manner of kings, with a glittering crown, clad in the yellow girdled robes, and he sporting a fine profusion of hair, unequalled by all around him, save by one that was a little behind, shadowed by his presence. So Shibli Bagarag thought, 'Is one of this twain Shagpat? for never till now have I seen such rare growths, and 'twere indeed a bliss to slip the blade between them and those masses of darkness that hang from them.' Then he stepped before the King, and made himself prominent in his path, humbling himself; and it was as he anticipated, the King prevented his removal by the slaves that would have dragged him away, and desired a hearing as to his business, and what brought him to the city, a stranger.

Thereupon Shibli Bagarag prostrated himself and cried, 'O great King, Sovereign of the Time! surely I am one to be looked on with the eye of grace; and I am nephew to Baba Mustapha, renowned in Shiraz, a barber;—I a barber, and it is my prayer, O King of the Age, that thou take me under thy protection and the shield of thy fair will, while I perform good work in this city by operating on the unshorn.'

When he had spoken, the King made a point of his eyebrows, and exclaimed, 'Shiraz? So they hold out against Shagpat yet, aha? Shiraz! that nest of them! that reptile's nest!' Then he turned to his Vizier beside him, and said, 'What shall be done with this fellow?'

So the Vizier replied, 'Twere well, O King, he be summoned to a sense of the loathsomeness of his craft by the agency of fifty stripes.'

The King said, 'Tis commanded!'

Then he passed forward in his majesty, and Shibli Bagarag was ware of the power of five slaves upon him, and he was hurried at a quick pace through the streets and before the eyes of the people, even to the common receptacle of felons, and there received from each slave severally ten thwacks with a thong: 'tis certain that at every thwack the thong took an airing before it descended upon him. Then loosed they him, to wander whither he listed; and disgust was strong in him by reason of the disgrace and the severity of the administration of the blows. He strayed along the streets in wretchedness, and hunger increased on him, assailing him first as a wolf in his vitals, then as it had been a chasm yawning betwixt his trunk and his lower members. And he thought, 'I have been long in chase of great things, and the hope of attaining them is great; yet, wullahy! would I barter all for one refreshing meal, and the sense of fulness. 'Tis so, and sad is it!' And he was mindful of the poet's words,—

Who seeks the shadow to the substance sinneth,
And daily craving what is not, he thinneth:
His lean ambition how shall he attain?
For with this constant foolishness he doeth,
He, waxing liker to what he pursueth,
Himself becometh what he chased in vain!

And again:

Of honour half my fellows boast,—
A thing that scorns and kills us:
Methinks that honours us the most

Which nourishes and fills us.

So he thought he would of a surety fling far away his tackle, discard barbercraft, and be as other men, a mortal, forgotten with his generation. And he cried aloud, 'O thou old woman! thou deceiver! what halt thou obtained for me by thy deceits? and why put I faith in thee to the purchase of a thwacking? Woe's me! I would thou hadst been but a dream, thou crone! thou guileful parcel of belabouring bones!'

Now, while he lounged and strolled, and was abusing the old woman, he looked before him, and lo, one lolling in his shop-front, and people standing outside the shop, marking him with admiration and reverence, and pointing him out to each other with approving gestures. He who lolled there was indeed a miracle of hairiness, black with hair as he had been muzzled with it, and his head as it were a berry in a bush by reason of it. Then thought Shibli Bagarag, "Tis Shagpat! If the mole could swear to him, surely can I.' So he regarded the clothier, and there was naught seen on earth like the gravity of Shagpat as he lolled before those people, that failed not to assemble in groups and gaze at him. He was as a sleepy lion cased in his mane; as an owl drowsy in the daylight. Now would he close an eye, or move two fingers, but of other motion made he none, yet the people gazed at him with eagerness. Shibli Bagarag was astonished at them, thinking, 'Hair! hair! There is might in hair; but there is greater might in the barber! Nevertheless here the barber is scorned, the grower of crops held in amazing reverence.' Then thought he, "Tis truly wondrous the crop he groweth; not even King Shamshureen, after a thousand years, sported such mighty profusion! Him I sheared: it was a high task!—why not this Shagpat?'

Now, long gazing on Shagpat awoke in Shibli Bagarag fierce desire to shear him, and it was scarce in his power to restrain himself from flying at the clothier, he saying, 'What obstacle now? what protecteth him? Nay, why not trust to the old woman? Said she not I should first essay on Shagpat? and 'twas my folly in appealing to the King that brought on me that thwacking. 'Tis well! I'll trust to her words. Wullahy! will it not lead me to great things?'

So it was, that as he thought this he continued to keep eye on Shagpat, and the hunger that was in him passed, and became a ravenous vulture that flew from him and singled forth Shagpat as prey; and there was no help for it but in he must go and state his case to Shagpat, and essay shearing him.

Now, when he was in the presence, he exclaimed, 'Peace, O vendor of apparel, unto thee and unto thine!'

Shagpat answered, 'That with thee!'

Said Shibli Bagarag, 'I have heard of thee, O thou wonder! Wullahy! I am here to render homage to that I behold.'

Shagpat answered, "'Tis well!'

Then said Shibli Bagarag, 'Praise my discretion! I have even this day entered the city, and it is to thee I offer the first shave, O tangle of glory!'

At these words Shagpat darkened, saying gruffly, 'Thy jest is offensive, and it is unseasonable for staleness and lack of holiness.'

But Shibli Bagarag cried, 'No jest, O purveyor to the outward of us! but a very excellent earnest.'

Thereat the face of Shagpat was as an exceeding red berry in a bush, and he said angrily, 'Have done! no more of it! or haply my spleen will be awakened, and that of them who see with more eyes than two.'

Nevertheless Shibli Bagarag urged him, and he winked, and gesticulated, and pointed to his head, crying, 'Fall not, O man of the nicety of measure, into the trap of error; for 'tis I that am a barber, and a rarity in this city, even Shibli Bagarag of Shiraz! Know me nephew of the renowned Baba Mustapha, chief barber to the Court of Persia. Languishest thou not for my art? Lo! with three sweeps I'll give thee a clean poll, all save the Identical! and I can discern and save it; fear me not, nor distrust my skill and the cunning that is mine.'

When he had heard Shibli Bagarag to a close, the countenance of Shagpat waxed fiery, as it had been flame kindled by travellers at night in a thorny bramble-bush, and he ruffled, and heaved, and was as when dense jungle-growths are stirred violently by the near approach of a wild animal in his fury, shouting in short breaths, 'A barber! a barber! Is't so? can it be? To me? A barber! O thou, thou reptile! filthy thing! A barber! O dog! A barber? What? when I bid fair for the highest honours known? O sacrilegious wretch! monster! How? are the Afrites jealous, that they send thee to jibe me?'

Thereupon he set up a cry for his wife, and that woman rushed to him from an inner room, and fell upon Shibli Bagarag, belabouring him.

So, when she was weary of this, she said, 'O light of my eyes! O golden crop and adorable man! what hath he done to thee?'

Shagpat answered, 'Tis a barber! and he hath sworn to shave me, and leave me not save shorn!'

Hardly had Shagpat spoken this, when she became limp with the hearing of it. Then Shibli Bagarag slunk from the shop; but without the crowd had increased, seeing an altercation, and as he took to his heels they followed him, and there was uproar in the streets of the city and in the air above them, as of raging Genii, he like a started quarry doubling this way and that, and at the corners of streets and open places, speeding on till there was no breath in his body, the cry still after him that he had bearded Shagpat. At last they came up with him, and belaboured him each and all; it was a storm of thwacks that fell on the back of Shibli Bagarag. When they had wearied themselves in this fashion, they took him as had he been a stray bundle or a damaged bale, and hurled him from the gates of the city into the wilderness once more.

Now, when he was alone, he staggered awhile and then flung himself to the earth, looking neither to the right nor to the left, nor above. All he could think was, 'O accursed old woman!' and this he kept repeating to himself for solace; as the poet says:

'Tis sure the special privilege of hate,
To curse the authors of our evil state.

As he was thus complaining, behold the very old woman before him! And she wheezed, and croaked, and coughed, and shook herself, and screwed her face into a pleasing pucker, and assumed womanish airs, and swayed herself, like as do the full moons of the harem when the eye of the master is upon them. Having made an end of these prettinesses, she said, in a tone of soft insinuation, 'O youth, nephew of the barber, look upon me.'

Shibli Bagarag knew her voice, and he would not look, thinking, 'Oh, what a dreadful old woman is this! just calling on her name in detestation maketh her present to us.' So the old woman, seeing him resolute to shun her, leaned to him, and put one hand to her dress, and squatted beside him, and said, 'O youth, thou hast been thwacked!'

He groaned, lifting not his face, nor saying aught. Then said she, 'Art thou truly in search of great things, O youth?'

Still he groaned, answering no syllable. And she continued, 'Tis surely in sweet friendliness I ask. Art thou not a fair youth, one to entice a damsel to perfect friendliness?'

Louder yet did he groan at her words, thinking, 'A damsel, verily!' So the old woman said, 'I wot thou art angry with me; but now look up, O nephew of the barber! no time for vexation. What says the poet?—

"Cares the warrior for his wounds
When the steed in battle bounds?"

Moreover:

"Let him who grasps the crown strip not for shame,
Lest he expose what gain'd it blow and maim!"

So be it with thee and thy thwacking, O foolish youth! Hide it from thyself, thou silly one! What! thou hast been thwacked, and refuseth the fruit of it—which is resoluteness, strength of mind, sternness in pursuit of the object!

Then she softened her tone to persuasiveness, saying, "Twas written I should be the head of thy fortune, O Shibli Bagarag! and thou'lt be enviable among men by my aid, so look upon me, and (for I know thee famished) thou shah presently be supplied with viands and bright wines and sweetmeats, delicacies to cheer thee.'

Now, the promise of food and provision was powerful with Shibli Bagarag, and he looked up gloomily. And the old woman smiled archly at him, and wriggled in her seat like a dusty worm, and said, 'Dost thou find me charming, thou fair youth?'

He was nigh laughing in her face, but restrained himself to reply, 'Thou art that thou art!'

Said she, 'Not so, but that I shall be.' Then she said, 'O youth, pay me now a compliment!'

Shibli Bagarag was at a loss what further to say to the old woman, for his heart cursed her for her persecutions, and ridiculed her for her vanities. At last he bethought himself of the saying of the poet, truly the offspring of fine wit, where he says:

Expect no flatteries from me,
While I am empty of good things;
I'll call thee fair, and I'll agree
Thou boldest Love in silken strings,
When thou bast primed me from thy plenteous store!
But, oh! till then a clod am I:
No seed within to throw up flowers:
All's drouthy to the fountain dry:
To empty stomachs Nature lowers:
The lake was full where heaven look'd fair of yore!

So, when he had spoken that, the old woman laughed and exclaimed, 'Thou art apt! it is well said! Surely I excuse thee till that time! Now listen! 'Tis written we work together, and I know it by divination. Have I not known thee wandering, and on thy way to this city of Shagpat, where thou'lt some day sit throned? Now I propose to thee this—and 'tis an excellent proposal—that I lead thee to great things, and make thee glorious, a sitter in high seats, Master of an Event?'

Cried he, 'A proposal honourable to thee, and pleasant in the ear.'

She added, 'Provided thou marry me in sweet marriage.'

Thereat he stared on vacancy with a serious eye, and he could scarce credit her earnestness, but she repeated the same. So presently he thought, 'This old hag appeareth deep in the fountain of events, and she will be a right arm to me in the mastering of one, a torch in darkness, seeing there is wisdom in her as well as wickedness. The thwackings?—sad was their taste, but they're in the road leading to greatness, and I cannot say she put me out of that road in putting me where they were. Her age?—shall I complain of that when it is a sign she goeth shortly altogether?'

As he was thus debating he regarded the old woman stealthily, and she was in agitation, so that her joints creaked like forest branches in a wind, and the puckers of her visage moved as do billows of the sea to and fro, and the anticipations of a fair young bride are not more eager than what was visible in the old woman. Wheedlingly she looked at him, and shaped her mouth like a bird's bill to soften it; and she drew together her dress, to give herself the look of slimness, using all fascinations.

He thought, 'Tis a wondrous old woman! Marriage would seem a thing of moment to her, yet is the profit with me, and I'll agree to it.' So he said, 'Tis a pact between us, O old woman!'

Now, the eyes of the old woman brightened when she heard him, and were as the eyes of a falcon that eyeth game, hungry with red fire, and she looked brisk with impatience, laughing a low laugh and saying, 'O youth, I must claim of thee, as is usual in such cases, the kiss of contract.'

So Shibli Bagarag was mindful of what is written,

If thou wouldst take the great leap, be ready for the little jump,

and he stretched out his mouth to the forehead of the old woman. When he had done so, it was as though she had been illuminated, as when light is put in the hollow of a pumpkin. Then said she, 'This is well! this is a fair beginning! Now look, for thy fortune will of a surety follow. Call me now sweet bride, and knocker at the threshold of hearts!'

So Shibli Bagarag sighed, and called her this, and he said, 'Forget not my condition, O old woman, and that I am nigh famished.'

Upon that she nodded gravely, and arose and shook her garments together, and beckoned for Shibli Bagarag to follow her; and the two passed through the gates of the city, and held on together through divers streets and thoroughfares till they came before the doors of a palace with a pillared entrance; and the old woman passed through the doors of the palace as one familiar to them, and lo! they were in a lofty court, built all of marble, and in the middle of it a fountain playing, splashing silvery. Shibli Bagarag would have halted here to breathe the cool refreshingness of the air, but the old woman would not; and she hurried on even to the opening of a spacious Hall, and in it slaves in circle round a raised seat, where sat one that was their lord, and it was the Chief Vizier of the King.

Then the old woman turned round sharply to Shibli Bagarag, and said, 'How of thy tackle, O my betrothed?'

He answered, 'The edge is keen, the hand ready.'

Then said she, 'Tis well.'

So the old woman put her two hands on the shoulders of Shibli Bagarag, saying, 'Make thy reverence to him on the raised seat; have faith in thy tackle and in me. Renounce not either, whatsoever ensueth. Be not abashed, O my bridegroom to be!'

Thereupon she thrust him in; and Shibli Bagarag was abashed, and played foolishly with his fingers, knowing not what to do. So when the Chief Vizier saw him he cried out, 'Who art thou, and what wantest thou?'

Now, the back of Shibli Bagarag tingled when he heard the Vizier's voice, and he said, 'I am, O man of exalted condition, he whom men know as Shibli Bagarag, nephew to Baba Mustapha, the renowned of Shiraz; myself barber likewise, proud of my art, prepared to exercise it.'

Then said the Chief Vizier, 'This even to our faces! Wonderful is the audacity of impudence! Know, O nephew of the barber, thou art among them that honour not thy art. Is it not written, For one thing thou shalt be crowned here, for that thing be thwacked there? So also it is written, The tongue of the insolent one is a lash and a perpetual castigation to him. And it is written, O Shibli Bagarag, that I reap honour from thee, and there is no help but that thou be made an example of.'

So the Chief Vizier uttered command, and Shibli Bagarag was ware of the power of five slaves upon him; and they seized him familiarly, and placed him in position, and made ready his clothing for the reception of fifty other thwacks with a thong, each several thwack coming down on him with a hiss, as it were a serpent, and with a smack, as it were the mouth of satisfaction; and the people assembled extolled the Chief Vizier, saying, 'Well and valiantly done, O stay of the State! and such-like to the accursed race of barbers.'

Now, when they had passed before the Chief Vizier and departed, lo! he fell to laughing violently, so that his hair was agitated and was as a sand-cloud over him, and his countenance behind it was as the sun of the desert reflected ripplingly on the waters of a bubbling spring, for it had the aspect of merriness; and the Chief Vizier exclaimed, 'O Shibli Bagarag, have I not made fair show?'

And Shibli Bagarag said, 'Excellent fair show, O mighty one!' Yet knew he not in what, but he was abject by reason of the thwacks.

So the Vizier said, 'Thou lookest lean, even as one to whom Fortune oweth a long debt. Tell me now of thy barbercraft: perchance thy gain will be great thereby?'

And Shibli Bagarag answered, 'My gain has been great, O eminent in rank, but of evil quality, and I am content not to increase it.' And he broke forth into lamentations, crying in excellent verse:—

Why am I thus the sport of all—
A thing Fate knocketh like a ball
From point to point of evil chance,
Even as the sneer of Circumstance?
While thirsting for the highest fame,
I hunger like the lowest beast:
To be the first of men I aim
And find myself the least.

Now, the Vizier delayed not when he heard this to have a fair supply set before Shibli Bagarag, and meats dressed in divers fashions, spiced, and coloured, and with herbs, and wines in golden goblets, and slaves in attendance. So Shibli Bagarag ate and drank, and presently his soul arose from its prostration, and he cried, 'Wullahy! the head cook of King Shamshureen could have worked no better as regards the restorative process.'

Then said the Chief Vizier, 'O Shibli Bagarag, where now is thy tackle?'

And Shibli Bagarag winked and nodded and turned his head in the manner of the knowing ones, and he recited the verse:

'Tis well that we are sometimes circumspect,
And hold ourselves in witless ways deterred:
One thwacking made me seriously reflect;
A SECOND turned the cream of love to curd:
Most surely that profession I reject
Before the fear of a prospective THIRD.

So the Vizier said, "'Tis well, thou turnest verse neatly' And he exclaimed extemporaneously:
If thou wouldst have thy achievement as high

As the wings of Ambition can fly:
If thou the clear summit of hope wouldst attain,
And not have thy labour in vain;
Be steadfast in that which impell'd, for the peace
Of earth he who leaves must have trust:
He is safe while he soars, but when faith shall cease,
Desponding he drops to the dust.

Then said he, 'Fear no further thwacking, but honour and prosperity in the place of it. What says the poet?—

"We faint, when for the fire
There needs one spark;
We droop, when our desire

Is near its mark."

How near to it art thou, O Shibli Bagarag! Know, then, that among this people there is great reverence for the growing of hair, and he that is hairiest is honoured most, wherefore are barbers creatures of especial abhorrence, and of a surety flourish not. And so it is that I owe my station to the esteem I profess for the cultivation of hair, and to my persecution of the clippers of it. And in this kingdom is no one that beareth such a crop as I, saving one, a clothier, an accursed one!—and may a blight fall upon him for his vanity and his affectation of solemn priestliness, and his lolling in his shop-front to be admired and marvelled at by the people. So this fellow I would disgrace and bring to scorn,—this Shagpat! for he is mine enemy, and the eye of the King my master is on him. Now I conceive thy assistance in this matter, Shibli Bagarag,—thou, a barber.'

When Shibli Bagarag heard mention of Shagpat, and the desire for vengeance in the Vizier, he was as a new man, and he smelt the sweetness of his own revenge as a vulture smelleth the carrion from afar, and he said, 'I am thy servant, thy slave, O Vizier!' Then smiled he as to his own soul, and he exclaimed, 'On my head be it!'

And it was to him as when sudden gusts of perfume from garden roses of the valley meet the traveller's nostril on the hill that overlooketh the valley, filling him with ecstasy and newness of life, delicate visions. And he cried, 'Wullahy! this is fair; this is well! I am he that was appointed to do thy work, O man in office! What says the poet?—

"The destined hand doth strike the fated blow:
Surely the arrow's fitted to the bow!"

And he says:

"The feathered seed for the wind delayeth,
The wind above the garden swayeth,
The garden of its burden knoweth,
The burden falleth, sinketh, soweth."

So the Vizier chuckled and nodded, saying, 'Right, right! aptly spoken, O youth of favour! 'Tis even so, and there is wisdom in what is written:

"Chance is a poor knave;
Its own sad slave;
Two meet that were to meet:
Life 's no cheat."

Upon that he cried, 'First let us have with us the Eclipser of Reason, and take counsel with her, as is my custom.'

Now, the Vizier made signal to a slave in attendance, and the slave departed from the Hall, and the Vizier led Shibli Bagarag into a closer chamber, which had a smooth floor of inlaid silver and silken hangings, the windows looking forth on the gardens of the palace and its fountains and cool recesses of shade and temperate sweetness. While they sat there conversing in this metre and that, measuring quotations, lo! the old woman, the affianced of Shibli Bagarag—and she sumptuously arrayed, in perfect queenliness, her head bound in a circlet of gems and gold, her figure lustrous with a full robe of flowing crimson silk; and she wore slippers embroidered with golden trceries, and round her waist a girdle flashing with jewels, so that to look on she was as a long falling water in the last bright slant of the sun. Her hair hung disarranged, and spread in a scattered fashion off her

shoulders; and she was younger by many moons, her brow smooth where Shibli Bagarag had given the kiss of contract, her hand soft and white where he had taken it. Shibli Bagarag was smitten with astonishment at sight of her, and he thought, 'Surely the aspect of this old woman would realise the story of Bhanavar the Beautiful; and it is a story marvellous to think of; yet how great is the likeness between Bhanavar and this old woman that groweth younger!'

And he thought again, 'What if the story of Bhanavar be a true one; this old woman such as she—no other?'

So, while he considered her, the Vizier exclaimed, 'Is she not fair—my daughter?'

And the youth answered, 'She is, O Vizier, that she is!'

But the Vizier cried, 'Nay, by Allah! she is that she will be.' And the Vizier said, 'Tis she that is my daughter; tell me thy thought of her, as thou thinkest it.'

And Shibli Bagarag replied, 'O Vizier, my thought of her is, she seemeth indeed as Bhanavar the Beautiful—no other.'

Then the Vizier and the Eclipser of Reason exclaimed together, 'How of Bhanavar and her story, O youth? We listen!'

So Shibli Bagarag leaned slightly on a cushion of a couch, and narrated as followeth.

AND THIS IS THE STORY OF BHANAVAR THE BEAUTIFUL

Know that at the foot of a lofty mountain of the Caucasus there lieth a deep blue lake; near to this lake a nest of serpents, wise and ancient. Now, it was the habit of a damsel to pass by the lake early at morn, on her way from the tents of her tribe to the pastures of the flocks. As she pressed the white arch of her feet on the soft green-mossed grasses by the shore of the lake she would let loose her hair, looking over into the water, and bind the braid again round her temples and behind her ears, as it had been in a lucent mirror: so doing she would laugh. Her laughter was like the falls of water at moonrise; her loveliness like the very moonrise; and she was stately as a palm-tree standing before the moon.

This was Bhanavar the Beautiful.

Now, the damsel was betrothed to the son of a neighbouring Emir, a youth comely, well-fashioned, skilled with the bow, apt in all exercises; one that sat his mare firm as the trained falcon that fixeth on the plunging bull of the plains; fair and terrible in combat as the lightning that strideth the rolling storm; and it is sung by the poet:

When on his desert mare I see
My prince of men,
I think him then
As high above humanity
As he shines radiant over me.

Lo! like a torrent he doth bound,
Breasting the shock
From rock to rock:
A pillar of storm, he shakes the ground,

His turban on his temples wound.

Match me for worth to be adored
A youth like him
In heart and limb!
Swift as his anger is his sword;
Softer than woman his true word.

Now, the love of this youth for the damsel Bhanavar was a consuming passion, and the father of the damsel and the father of the youth looked fairly on the prospect of their union, which was near, and was plighted as the union of the two tribes. So they met, and there was no voice against their meeting, and all the love that was in them they were free to pour forth far from the hearing of men, even where they would. Before the rising of the sun, and ere his setting, the youth rode swiftly from the green tents of the Emir his father, to waylay her by the waters of the lake; and Bhanavar was there, bending over the lake, her image in the lake glowing like the fair fulness of the moon; and the youth leaned to her from his steed, and sang to her verses of her great loveliness ere she was wistful of him. Then she turned to him, and laughed lightly a welcome of sweetness, and shook the falls of her hair across the blushes of her face and her bosom; and he folded her to him, and those two would fondle together in the fashion of the betrothed ones (the blessing of Allah be on them all!), gazing

on each other till their eyes swam with tears, and they were nigh swooning with the fulness of their bliss. Surely 'twas an innocent and tender dalliance, and their prattle was that of lovers till the time of parting, he showing her how she looked best—she him; and they were forgetful of all else that is, in their sweet interchange of flatteries; and the world was a wilderness to them both when the youth parted with Bhanavar by the brook which bounded the tents of her tribe.

It was on a night when they were so together, the damsel leaning on his arm, her eyes toward the lake, and lo! what seemed the reflection of a large star in the water; and there was darkness in the sky above it, thick clouds, and no sight of the heavens; so she held her face to him sideways and said, 'What meaneth this, O my betrothed? for there is reflected in yonder lake a light as of a star, and there is no star visible this night.'

The youth trembled as one in trouble of spirit, and exclaimed, 'Look not on it, O my soul! It is of evil omen.'

But Bhanavar kept her gaze constantly on the light, and the light increased in lustre; and the light became, from a pale sad splendour, dazzling in its brilliancy. Listening, they heard presently a gurgling noise as of one deeply drinking. Then the youth sighed a heavy sigh and said, 'This is the Serpent of the Lake drinking of its waters, as is her wont once every moon, and whoso heareth her drink by the sheening of that light is under a destiny dark and imminent; so know I my days are numbered, and it was foretold of me, this!' Now the youth sought to dissuade Bhanavar from gazing on the light, and he flung his whole body before her eyes, and clasped her head upon his breast, and clung about her, caressing her; yet she slipped from him, and she cried, 'Tell me of this serpent, and of this light.'

So he said, 'Seek not to hear of it, O my betrothed!'

Then she gazed at the light a moment more intently, and turned her fair shape toward him, and put up her long white fingers to his chin, and smoothed him with their softness, whispering, 'Tell me of it, my life!'

And so it was that her winningness melted him, and he said, 'Bhanavar! the serpent is the Serpent of the Lake; old, wise, powerful; of the brood of the sacred mountain, that lifteth by day a peak of gold, and by night a point of solitary silver. In her head, upon her forehead, between her eyes, there is a Jewel, and it is this light.'

Then she said, 'How came the Jewel there, in such a place?'

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