

The Shaving of Shagpat; an Arabian entertainment — Volume 4 eBook

The Shaving of Shagpat; an Arabian entertainment — Volume 4 by George Meredith

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KOOROOKH

Now, they sped from the Cave of Chrysolites by another passage than that by which they entered it, and nothing but the light of the Sword to guide them. By that light Shibli Bagarag could distinguish glimmering shapes, silent and statue-like, to the right and the left of them, their visages hidden in a veil of heavy webs; and he saw what seemed in the dusk broad halls, halls of council, and again black pools and black groves, and columns of crowded porticoes,—all signs of an underground kingdom. They came to some steps and mounted these severally, coming to a platform, in the middle of which leapt a fountain, the top spray of it touched with a beam of earth and the air breathed by men. Here he heard the youths dabble with the dark waters, and he discerned Gulrevaz tossing it in her two hands, calling, 'Koorookh! Koorookh!' Then they said to him, 'Stir this fountain with the Sword, O Master of the Event!' So he stirred the fountain, and the whole body of it took a leap toward the light that was like the shoot of a long lance of silver in the moon's rays, and lo! in its place the ruffled feathers of a bird. Then the seven youths and the Princess and Shibli Bagarag got up under its feathers like a brood of water-fowl; and the bird winged straight up as doth a blinded bee, ascending, and passing in the ascent a widening succession of winding terraces, till he observed the copper sun of Aklis and the red lands below it. Thrice, in the exuberance of his gladness, he waved the Sword, and the sun lost that dulness on its disk and took a bright flame, and threw golden arrows everywhere; and the pastures were green, the streams clear, the sands sparkling. The bird flew, and circled, and hung poised a moment, presently descending on the roof of the palace. Now, there was here a piece of solid glass, propped on two crossed bars of gold, and it was shaped like an eye, and might have been taken for one of the eyes inhabiting the head of some monstrous Genie. Shibli Bagarag ran to it when he was afoot, and peered through it. Surely, it was the first object of his heart that he beheld—Noorna, his betrothed, pale on the pillar; she with her head between her hands and her hair scattered by the storm, as one despairing. Still he looked, and he saw swimming round the pillar that monstrous fish, with its sole baleful eye, which had gulped them both in the closed shell of magic pearl; and he knew the fish for Karaz, the Genie, their enemy. Then he turned to the Princess, with an imploring voice for counsel how to reach her and bring her rescue; but she said, 'The Sword is in thy hands, none of us dare wield it'; and the seven youths answered likewise. So, left to himself, he drew the Sword from his girdle, and hissed on the heads of the serpents, at the same time holding it so that it might lengthen out inimitably. Then he leaned it over the eye of the glass, in the direction of the pillar besieged by the billows, and

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lo! with one cut, even at that distance, he divided the fishy monster, and with another severed the chains that had fettered Noorna; and she arose and smiled blissfully to the sky, and stood upright, and signalled him to lay the point of the blade on the pillar. When he had done this, knowing her wisdom, she put a foot boldly upon the blade and ran up it toward him, and she was half-way up the blade, when suddenly a kite darted down upon her, pecking at her eyes, to confuse her. She waxed unsteady and swayed this way and that, balancing with one arm and defending herself from the attacks of the kite with another. It seemed to Shibli Bagarag she must fall and be lost; and the sweat started on his forehead in great drops big as nuts. Seeing that and the agitation of his limbs, Gulrevaz cried, 'O Master of the Event, let us hear it!'

But he shrieked, 'The kite! the kite! she is running up the blade, and the kite is at her eyes! and she swaying, swaying! falling, falling!'

So the Princess exclaimed, 'A kite! Koorookh is match for a kite!'

Then she smoothed the throat of Koorookh, and clasped round it a collar of bright steel, roughened with secret characters; and she took a hoop of gold, and passed the bird through it, urging it all the while with one strange syllable; and the bird went up with a strong whirr of the wing till he was over the sea, and caught sight of Noorna tottering beneath him on the blade, and the kite pecking fiercely at her. Thereat he fluttered eagerly a twinkle of time, and the next was down with his beak in the neck of the kite, crimsoned in it. Now, by the shouts and exclamations of Shibli Bagarag, the Princess and the seven youths, her brothers, knew that the bird had performed well his task, and that the fight was between Koorookh and the kite. Then he cried gladly to them, 'Joy for us, and Allah be praised! The kite is dropping, and she leaneth on one wing of Koorookh!'

And he cried in anguish, 'What see I? The kite is become a white ball, rolling down the blade toward her; and it will of a surety destroy her.' And he called to her, thinking vainly his voice might reach her. So the Princess said, 'A white ball? 'tis I that am match for a white ball!'

Now, she seized from the corner of the palace-roof a bow and an arrow, and her brothers lifted her to a level with the hilt of the Sword, leaning on the eye of glass. Then she planted one foot on the shoulder of Shibli Bagarag as he bent peering through the eye, and fitted the arrow to a level of the Sword, slanting its slant, and let it fly, doubling the bow. Shibli Bagarag saw the ball roll to within a foot of Noorna, when it was as if stricken by a gleam of light, and burst, and was a black cloud veined with fire, swathing her in folds. He lost all sight of Noorna; and where she had been were vivid flashes, and then a great flame, and in the midst a red serpent and a green serpent twisted as in the death-struggle. So he cried, 'A red serpent and a green serpent!'

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And the sons of Aklis exclaimed, 'A red serpent? 'Tis we that are match for a red serpent!'

Thereupon they descended steps through the palace roof, and while the fight between those two serpents was rageing, Shibli Bagarag beheld seven small bright birds, bee-catchers, that entered the flame, bearing in their bills slips of a herb, and hovering about the head of the red serpent, distracting it. Then he saw the red serpent hiss and snap at one, darting out its tongue, and lo! on the fork of its tongue the little bird let fall the slip of herb in its bill, and in an instant the serpent changed from red to yellow and from yellow to pale-spotted blue, and from that to a speckled indigo-colour, writhing at every change, and hissing fire from its open jaws. Meantime the green serpent was released and was making circles round the flame, seeking to complete some enchantment, when suddenly the whole scene vanished, and Shibli Bagarag again beheld Noorna steadying her steps on the blade, and leaning on one wing of Koorookh. She advanced up the blade, coming nearer and nearer; and he thought her close, and breathed quick and ceased looking through the glass. When he gazed abroad, lo! she was with Koorookh, on a far hill beyond the stream in outer Aklis. So he said to the Princess Gulrevaz, 'O Princess, comes she not to me here in the palace?'

But the Princess shook her head, and said, 'She hath not a spell! She waiteth for thee yonder with Koorookh. Now, look through the glass once more.'

He looked through the glass, and there on a plain, as he had first seen it when Noorna appeared to him, was the City of Shagpat, and in the streets of the city a vast assembly, and a procession passing on, its front banner surmounted by the Crescent, and bands with curled and curved instruments playing, and slaves scattering gold and clashing cymbals, every demonstration and evidence of a great day and a high occasion in the City of Shagpat! So he peered yet keenlier through the glass, and behold, the Vizier Feshnavat, father of Noorna, walking in fetters, subject to the jibes and evil-speaking of the crowds of people, his turban off, and he in a robe of drab-coloured stuff, in the scorned condition of an unbeliever. Shibli Bagarag peered yet more earnestly through the glass eye, and in the centre of the procession, clad gorgeously in silks and stuffs, woven with gold and gems, a crown upon his head, and the appanages of supremacy and majesty about him, was Shagpat. He paced upon a yellow flooring that was unrolled before him from a mighty roll; and there were slaves that swarmed on all sides of him, supporting upon gold pans and platters the masses of hair that spread bushily before and behind, and to the right and left of him. Truly the gravity of his demeanour exceeded that which is attained by Sheiks and Dervishes after much drinking of the waters of wisdom, and fasting, and abnegation of the pleasures that betray us to folly in this world! Now, when he saw Shagpat, the soul of Shibli Bagarag was quickened to do his appointed work upon him, shear him, and release the Vizier Feshnavat. Desire to shave Shagpat was as a salt thirst rageing in him, as the dream of munching to one that starveth; even as the impelling of violent tempests to skiffs on the sea; and he hungered to be at him, crying, as he peered, 'Tis he! even he, Shagpat!'

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Then he turned to the Princess Gulrevaz, and said, "Tis Shagpat, exalted, clothed with majesty, O thou morning star of Aklis!"

She said, 'Koorookh is given thee, and waiteth to carry ye both; and for me I will watch that this glass send forth a beam to light ye to that city; so farewell, O thou that art loved! And delay in nothing to finish the work in hand.'

Now, when he had set his face from the Princess he descended through the roof of the palace, and met the seven youths returning, and they accompanied him through the halls of the palace to that hall where the damsels had duped him. He was mindful of his promise to the old man crowned, and flashed the Sword a strong flash, so that he who looked on it would be seared in the eyelashes. Then the doors of the recesses flew apart, eight-and-ninety in number, and he beheld divers sitters on thrones, with the diadem of asses' ears stiffened upright, and monkeys' skulls grinning with gems; they having on each countenance the look of sovereigns and the serenity of high estate. Shibli Bagarag laughed at them, and he thought, 'Wullahy! was I one of these? I, the beloved of Noorna, destined Master of the Event!' and he thought, 'Of a surety, if these sitters could but laugh at themselves, there would be a release for them, and the crown would topple off which getteth the homage of asses and monkeys!' He would have spoken to them, but the sons of Aklis said, 'They have seen the flashing of the Sword, and 'twere well they wake not.' As they went from the hall the seven youths said, 'Reflect upon the age of these sitters, that have been sitting in the chairs from three to eleven generations back! And they were searchers of the Sword like thee, but were duped! In like manner, the hen sitteth in complacency, but she bringeth forth and may cackle; 'tis owing to the aids of Noorna that thou art not one of these sitters, O Master of the Event!' Now, they paced through the hall of dainty provender, and through the hall of the jewel-fountains, coming to the palace steps, where stood Abarak leaning on his bar. As they advanced to Abarak, there was a clamour in the halls behind, that gathered in noise like a torrent, and approached, and presently the Master was ware of a sharp stroke on his forehead with a hairy finger, and then a burn, and the Crown that had clung to him toppled off; surely it fell upon the head of the old monkey, the cautious and wise one, he that had made a study of Shibli Bagarag. Thereupon that monkey stalked scornfully from them; and Abarak cried, 'O Master of the Event! it was better for me to keep the passage of the Seventh Pillar, than be an ape of this order. Wah! the flashing of the Sword scorcheth them, and they scamper.'

THE VEILED FIGURE

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Verily there was lightning in Aklis as Shibli Bagarag flashed the Sword over the clamouring beasts: the shape of the great palace stood forth vividly, and a wide illumination struck up the streams, and gilded the large hanging leaves, and drew the hills glimmeringly together, and scattered fires on the flat faces of the rocks. Then the seven youths said quickly, 'Away! out of Aklis, O Master of the Event! from city to city of earth this light is visible, and men will know that Fate is in travail, and an Event preparing for them, and Shagpat will be warned by the portent; wherefore lose not the happy point of time on which thy star is manifest.' And they cried again, 'Away! out of Aklis!' with gestures of impatience, urging his departure.

Then said he, 'O youths, Sons of Aklis, it is written that gratitude is the poor man's mine of wealth, and the rich man's flower of beauty; and I have but that to give ye for all this aid and friendliness of yours.'

But they exclaimed, 'No aid or friendliness in Aklis! By the gall of the Roc! it is well for thee thou camest armed with potent spells, and hadst one to advise and inspirit thee, or thou wouldst have stayed here to people Aklis, and grazed in a strange shape.'

Now, the seven waxed in impatience, and he laid their hands upon his head and moved from them with Abarak, to where in the dusk the elephant that had brought them stood. Then the elephant kneeled and took the twain upon his back, and bore them across the dark land to that reach of the river where the boat was moored in readiness. They entered the boat silently among its drapery of lotuses, and the Veiled Figure ferried them over the stream that rippled not with their motion. As they were crossing, desire to know that Veiled Figure counselled Shibli Bagarag evilly to draw the Sword again, and flash it, so that the veil became transparent. Then, when Abarak turned to him for the reason of the flashing of the Sword, he beheld the eyes of the youth fixed in horror, glaring as at sights beyond the tomb. He said nought, but as the boat's-head whispered among the reeds and long flowers of the opposite marge, he took Shibli Bagarag by the shoulders and pushed him out of the boat, and leaped out likewise, leading him from the marge forcibly, hurrying him forward from it, he at the heels of the youth propelling him; and crying in out-of-breath voice at intervals, 'What sight? what sight?' But the youth was powerless of speech, and when at last he opened his lips, the little man shrank from him, for he laughed as do the insane, a peal of laughter ended by gasps; then a louder peal, presently softer; then a peal that started all the echoes in Aklis. After awhile, as Abarak still cried in his ear, 'What sight?' he looked at him with a large eye, saying querulously, 'Is it written I shall be pushed by the shoulder through life? And is it in the pursuit of further thwackings?'

Abarak heeded him not, crying still, 'What sight?' and Shibli Bagarag lowered his tone, and jerked his body, pronouncing the name 'Rabesqurat!' Then Abarak exclaimed, 'Tis as I weened. Oh, fool! to flash the Sword and peer through the veil! Truly, there be few wits will bear that sight!' On a sudden he cried, 'No cure but one, and that a sleep in the bosom of the betrothed!'

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Thereupon he hurried the youth yet faster across the dark lawns of Aklis toward the passage of the Seventh Pillar, by which the twain had entered that kingdom. And Shibli Bagarag saw as in a dream the shattered door, shattered by the bar, remembering dimly as a thing distant in years the netting of the Queen, and Noorna chained upon the pillar; he remembered Shagpat even vacantly in his mind, as one sheaf of barley amid other sheaves of the bearded field, so was he overcome by the awfulness of that sight behind the veil of the Veiled Figure!

As they advanced to the passage, he was aware of an impediment to its entrance, as it had been a wall of stone there; and seeing Abarak enter the passage without let, he kicked hard in front at the invisible obstruction, but there was no coming by. Abarak returned to him, and took his right arm, and raised the sleeve from his wrist, and lo, the two remaining hairs of Garraveen twisted round it in sapphire winds. Cried he, 'Oh, the generosity of Gulrevaz! she has left these two hairs that he may accomplish swiftly the destiny marked for him! but now, since his gazing through that veil, he must part with them to get out of Aklis.' And he muttered, 'His star is a strange one! one that leadeth him to fortune by the path of frowns! to greatness by the aid of thwackings! Truly the ways of Allah are wonderful!' Shibli Bagarag resisted him in nothing, and Abarak loosed the two bright hairs from his wrist, and those two hairs swelled and took glittering scales, and were sapphire snakes with wings of intense emerald; and they rose in the air spirally together, each over each, so that to see them one would fancy in the darkness a fountain of sapphire waters flashed with the sheen of emerald. When they had reached a height loftier than the topmost palace-towers of Aklis, they descended like javelins into the earth, and in a moment re-appeared, in the shape of Genii when they are charitably disposed to them they visit; not much above the mortal size, nor overbright, save for a certain fire in their eyes when they turned them; and they were clothed each from head to foot in an armour of sapphire plates shot with steely emerald. Surely the dragon-fly that darteth all day in the blaze over pools is like what they were. Abarak bit his forefinger and said, 'Who be ye, O sons of brilliance?'

They answered, 'Karavejis and Veejravoosh, slaves of the Sword.'

Then he said, 'Come with us now, O slaves of the Sword, and help us to the mountain of outer Aklis.'

They answered, 'O thou, there be but two means for us of quitting Aklis: on the wrist of the Master, or down the blade of the Sword! and from the wrist of the Master we have been loosed, and no one of thy race can tie us to it again.'

Abarak said, 'How then shall the Master leave Aklis?'

They answered, 'By Allah in Aklis! he can carve a way whither he will with the Sword.'

But Abarak cried, 'O Karavejis and Veejravoosh! he bath peered through the veil of the Ferrying Figure.'

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Now, when they heard his words, the visages of the Genii darkened, and they exclaimed sorrowfully, 'Serve we such a one?'

And they looked at Shibli Bagarag a look of anger, so that he, whose wits were in past occurrences, imagined them his enemy and the foe of Noorna split in two, crying, 'How? Is Karaz a couple? and do I multiply him with strokes of the Sword?'

Thereupon he drew the Sword from his girdle in wrath, flourishing it; and Karavejis and Veejravoosh felt the might of the Sword, and prostrated themselves to the ground at his feet. And Abarak said, 'Arise, and bring us swiftly to the mountain of outer Aklis.'

Then said they, 'Seek a passage down yonder brook in the moonbeams; and it is the sole passage for him now.'

Abarak went with them to the brook that was making watery music to itself between banks of splintered rock and over broad slabs of marble, bubbling here and there about the roots of large-leaved water-flowers, and catching the mirrored moon of Aklis in whirls, breaking it in lances. Then they waded into the water knee-deep, and the two Genii seized hold of a great slab of marble in the middle of the water, and under was a hollow brimmed with the brook, that the brook partly filled and flowed over. Then the Genii said to Abarak, 'Plunge!' and they said the same to Shibli Bagarag. The swayer of the Sword replied, as it had been a simple occasion, a common matter, and a thing for the exercise of civility, 'With pleasure and all willingness!' Thereupon he tightened his girth, and arrowing his two hands, flung up his heels and disappeared in the depths, Abarak following. Surely, those two went diving downward till it seemed to each there was no bottom in the depth, and they would not cease to feel the rushing of the water in their ears till the time anticipated by mortals.

THE BOSOM OF NOORNA

Now, while a thousand sparks of fire were bursting on the sight of the two divers, and they speeded heels uppermost to the destiny marked out for them by the premeditations of the All-Wise, lo! Noorna was on the mountain in outer Aklis with Koorookh, waiting for the appearance of her betrothed, Sword in hand. She saw beams from the blazing eye of Aklis, and knew by the redness of it that one, a mortal, was peering on the earth and certain of created things. So she waited awhile in patience for the return of her betrothed, with the head of Koorookh in her lap, caressing the bird, and teaching it words of our language; and the bird fashioned its bill to the pronouncing of names, such as 'Noorna' and 'Feshnavat,' and 'Goorelka'; and it said 'Karaz,' and stuck not at the name 'Shagpat,' and it learnt to say even 'Shagpat shall be shaved! Shagpat shall be shaved!' but no effort of Noorna could teach it to say, 'Shibli Bagarag,' the bird calling instead, 'Shiparack, Shiplabarack, Shibblisharack.' And Noorna chid it with her forefinger, crying, 'O Koorookh! wilt thou speak all names but that one of my betrothed?'

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So she said again, 'Shibli Bagarag.' And the bird answered, imitating its best, 'Shibberacavarack.' Noorna was wroth with it, crying, 'Oh naughty bird! is the name of my beloved hateful to thee?'

And she chid Koorookh angrily, he with a heavy eye sulking, and keeping the sullen feathers close upon his poll. Now, she thought, 'There is in this a meaning and I will fathom it.' So she counted the letters in the name of her betrothed, that were thirteen, and spelt them backwards, afterwards multiplying them by an equal number, and fashioning words from the selection of every third and seventh letter. Then took she the leaf from a tree and bade Koorookh fly with her to the base of the mountain sloping from Aklis to the sea, and there wrote with a pin's point on the leaf the words fashioned, dipping the leaf in the salt ripple by the beach, till they were distinctly traced. And it was revealed to her that Shibli Bagarag bore now a name that might be uttered by none, for that the bearer of it had peered through the veil of the ferrying figure in Aklis. When she knew that, her grief was heavy, and she sat on the cold stones of the beach and among the bright shells, weeping in anguish, loosing her hair, scattering it wildly, exclaiming, 'Awahy! woe on me! Was ever man more tired than he before entering Aklis, he that was in turns abased and beloved and exalted! yet his weakness clingeth to him, even in Aklis and with the Wondrous Sword in his grasp.'

Then she thought, 'Still he had strength to wield the Sword, for I marked the flashing of it, and 'twas he that leaned forward the blade to me; and he possesses the qualities that bring one gloriously to the fruits of enterprise!' And she thought, 'Of a surety, if Abarak be with him, and a single of the three slaves of the Sword that I released from the tail of Garraveen, Ravejoura, Karavejis, and Veejravoosh, he will yet come through, and I may revive him in my bosom for the task.' So, thinking upon that, the sweet crimson surprised her cheeks, and she arose and drew Koorookh with her along the beach till they came to some rocks piled ruggedly and the waves breaking over them. She mounted these, and stepped across them to the entrance of a cavern, where flowed a full water swiftly to the sea, rolling smooth bulks over and over, and with a translucent light in each, showing precious pebbles in the bed of the water below; agates of size, limpid cornelians, plates of polished jet, rubies, diamonds innumerable that were smitten into sheen by slant rays of the level sun, the sun just losing its circle behind lustrous billows of that Enchanted Sea. She turned to Koorookh a moment, saying, with a coax of smiles, 'Will my bird wait here for me, even at this point?' Koorookh clapped both his wings, and she said again, petting him, 'He will keep watch to pluck me from the force of water as I roll past, that I be not carried to the sea, and lost?'

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Koorookh still clapped his wings, and she entered under the arch of the cavern. It was roofed with crystals, a sight of glory, with golden lamps at intervals, still centres of a thousand beams. Taking the sandal from her left foot and tucking up the folds of her trousers to the bend of her clear white knee, she advanced, half wading, up the winds of the cavern, and holding by the juts of granite here and there, till she came to a long straight lane in the cavern, and at the end of it, far down, a solid pillar of many-coloured water that fell into the current, as it had been one block of gleaming marble from the roof, without ceasing. Now, she made toward it, and fixed her eye warily wide on it, and it was bright, flawless in brilliancy; but while she gazed a sudden blot was visible, and she observed in the body of the fall two dark objects plumping downward one after the other, like bolts, and they splashed in the current and were carried off by the violence of its full sweep, shooting by her where she stood, rapidly; but she, knotting her garments round the waist to give her limbs freedom and swiftness, ran a space, and then bent and plunged, catching, as she rose, the foremost to her bosom, and whirled away under the flashing crystals like a fish scaled with splendours that hath darted and seized upon a prey, and is bearing it greedily to some secure corner of the deeps to swallow the quivering repast at leisure. Surely, the heart of Noorna was wise of what she bore against her bosom; and it beat exulting strokes in the midst of the rush and roar and gurgle of the torrent, and the gulping sounds and multitudinous outcries of the headlong water. That verse of the poet would apply to her where he says:

Lead me to the precipice,
And bid me leap the dark abyss:
I care not what the danger be,
So my beloved, my beauteous vision,
Be but the prize I bear with me,
For she to Paradise can turn Perdition.

Praise be to him that planteth love, the worker of this marvel, within us! Now, she sped in the manner narrated through the mazes of the cavern, coming suddenly to the point at the entrance where perched Koorookh gravely upon one leg, like a bird with an angling beak: he caught at her as she was hurling toward the sea, and drew her to the bank of rock, that burden on her bosom; and it was Shibli Bagarag, her betrothed, his eyes closed, his whole countenance colourless. Behind him like a shadow streamed Abarak, and Noorna kneeled by the waterside and fetched the little man from it likewise; he was without a change, as if drawn from a familiar element; and when he had prostrated himself thrice and called on the Prophet's name in the form of thanksgiving, he wrung his beard of the wet, and had wit to bless the action of Noorna, that saved him. Then the two raised Shibli Bagarag from the rock, and reclined him lengthwise under the wings of Koorookh, and Noorna stretched herself there beside him with one arm about his neck, the fair head

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of the youth on her bosom. And she said to Abarak, 'He hath dreamed many dreams, my betrothed, but never one so sweet as that I give him. Already, see, the hue returneth to his cheek and the dimples of pleasure.' So was it; and she said, 'Mount, O thou of the net and the bar! and stride Koorookh across the neck, for it is nigh the setting of the moon, and by dawn we must be in our middle flight, seen of men, a cloud over them.'

Said Abarak, 'To hear is to obey!'

He bestrode the neck of Koorookh and sat with dangling feet, till she cried, 'Rise!' and the bird spread its wings and flapped them wide, rising high in the silver rays, and flying rapidly forward with the three on him from the mountain in front of Akkis, and the white sea with its enchanted isles and wonders; flying and soaring till the earth was as what might be held in the hollow of the hand, and the kingdoms of the earth a mingled heap of shining dust in the midst.

THE REVIVAL

Now, the feathers of Koorookh in his flight were ruffled by a chill breeze, and they were speeding through a light glow of cold rose-colour. Then said Noorna, "'Tis the messenger of morning, the blush. Oh, what changes will date from this day!'

The glow of rose became golden, and they beheld underneath them, on one side, the rim of the rising red sun, and rays streaming over the earth and its waters. And Noorna said, 'I must warn Feshnavat, my father, and prepare him for our coming.'

So she plucked a feather from Koorookh and laid the quill downward, letting it drop. Then said she, 'Now for the awakening of my betrothed!'

Thereupon she hugged his head a moment, and kissed him on the eyelids, the cheeks, and the lips, crying, 'By this means only!' Crying that, she pushed him, sliding, from the back of the bird, and he parted from them, falling headforemost in the air like a stricken eagle. Then she called to Koorookh, 'Seize him!' and the bird slanted his beak and closed his wings, the two, Abarak and Noorna, clinging to him tightly; and he was down like an arrow between Shibli Bagarag and the ground, spreading beneath him like a tent, and Noorna caught the youth gently to her lap; then she pushed him off again, intercepting his descent once more, till they were on a level with one of the mountains of the earth, from which the City of Shagpat is visible among the yellow sands like a white spot in the yolk of an egg. So by this time the eyes of the youth gave symptoms of a desire to look upon the things that be, peeping faintly beneath the lashes, and she

exclaimed joyfully, raising her white hands above her head, 'One plunge in the lake, and life will be his again!'

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Below them was a green lake, tinted by the dawn with crimson and yellow, deep, and with high banks. As they crossed it to the middle, she slipped off the youth from Koorookh, and he with a great plunge was received into the stillness of the lake. Meanwhile Koorookh quivered his wings and seized him when he arose, bearing him to an end of the lake, where stood one dressed like a Dervish, and it was the Vizier Feshnavat, the father of Noorna. So when he saw them, he shouted the shout of congratulation, catching Noorna to his breast, and Shibli Bagarag stretched as doth a heavy sleeper in his last doze, saying, in a yawning voice, 'What trouble? I wot there is nought more for us now that Shagpat is shaved! Oh, I have had a dream, a dream! He that is among Houris in Paradise dreameth not a dream like that. And I dreamed—'tis gone!'

Then said he, staring at them, 'Who be ye? What is this?'

Noorna, took him again to her bosom, and held him there; and she plucked a herb, and squeezed it till a drop from it fell on either of his lids, applying to them likewise a dew from the serpents of the Sword, and he awoke to the reality of things. Surely, then he prostrated himself and repeated the articles of his faith, taking one hand of his betrothed and kissing her; and he embraced Abarak and Feshnavat, saying to the father of Noorna, 'I know, O Feshnavat, that by my folly and through my weakness I have lost time in this undertaking, but it shall be short work now with Shagpat. This thy daughter, the Eclipser of Reason, was ever such a prize as she? I will deserve her. Wullahy! I am now a new man, sprung like fire from ashes. Lo, I am revived by her for the great work.'

Said Abarak: 'O Master of the Event, secure now without delay the two slaves of the Sword, and lean the blade toward Aklis.'

Upon that, he ran up rapidly to the summit of the mountain and drew the Sword from his girdle, and leaned it toward Aklis, and it lengthened out over lands, the blade of it a beam of solid brilliance. Presently, from forth the invisible remoteness they saw the two Genii, Karavejis and Veejravoosh, and they were footing the blade swiftly, like stars, speeding up till they were within reach of the serpents of the hilt, when they dropped to the earth, bowing their heads; so he commanded them to rise, crying, 'Search ye the earth and its confines, and bring hither tidings of the Genie Karaz.'

They said, 'To hear is to obey.'

Then they began to circle each round the other, circling more and more sharply till beyond the stretch of sight, and Shibli Bagarag said to Feshnavat, 'Am I not awake, O Feshnavat? I will know where is Karaz ere I seek to operate on Shagpat, for it is well spoken of the poet:

“Obstructions first remove
Ere thou thy cunning prove”;

and I will encounter this Karaz that was our Ass, ere I try the great shave.’

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Then said he, turning quickly, 'Yonder is the light from Aklis striking on the city, and I mark Shagpat, even he, illumined by it, singled out, where he sitteth on the roof of the palace by the market-place.'

So they looked, and it was as he had spoken, that Shagpat was singled out in the midst of the city by the wondrous beams of the eye of Aklis, and made prominent in effulgence.

Said Abarak, climbing to the level of observation, 'He hath a redness like the inside of a halved pomegranate.'

Feshnavat stroked his chin, exclaiming, 'He may be likened to a mountain goat in the midst of a forest roaring with conflagration.'

Said Shibli Bagarag, 'Now is he the red-maned lion, the bristling boar, the uncombed buffalo, the plumaged cock, but soon will he be like nothing else save the wrinkled kernel of a shaggy fruit. Lo, now, the Sword! it leapeth to be at him, and 'twill be as the keen icicle of winter to that perishing foliage, that doomed crop! So doth the destined minute destroy with a flash the hoarded arrogance of ages; and the destined hand doeth what creation failed to perform; and 'tis by order, destiny, and preordainment, that the works of this world come to pass. This know I, and I witness thereto that am of a surety ordained to the Shaving of Shagpat!'

Then he stood apart and gazed from Shagpat to the city that now began to move with the morning; elephants and coursers saddled by the gates of the King's palace were visible, and camels blocking the narrow streets, and the markets bustling. Surely, though the sun illumined that city, it was as a darkness behind Shagpat singled by the beams of Aklis.

THE PLOT

Now, while Shibli Bagarag gazed on Shagpat kindled by the beams of Aklis, lo, the Genii Karavejis and Veejravoosh circling each other in swift circles like two sapphire rings toward him, and they whirled to a point above his head, and fell and prostrated themselves at his feet: so he cried, 'O ye slaves of the Sword, my servitors! how of the whereabouts of Karaz?'

They answered, 'O Master of the Event, we found him after many circlings far off, and 'twas by the borders of the Putrid Sea. We came not close on him, for he is stronger than we without the Sword, but it seemed he was distilling drops of an oil from certain substances, large thickened drops that dropped into a phial.'

Then Shibli Bagarag said, 'The season of weakness with me is over, and they that confide in my strength, my cunning, my watchfulness, my wielding of the Sword, have



nought to fear for themselves. Now, this is my plot, O Feshnavat,—that part of it in which thou art to have a share. 'Tis that thou depart forthwith to the City yonder, and enter thy palace by a back entrance, and I will see that thou art joined within an hour of thy arrival there by Baba Mustapha, my uncle, the gabbler. He is there, as I guess by signs; I have had warnings of him. Discover him speedily. Thy task is then to induce him to make an attempt on the head of Shagpat in all wiliness, as he and thou think well to devise. He will fail, as I know, but what is that saying of the poet?

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“Persist, if thou wouldst truly reach thine ends,
For failures oft are but advising friends.”

And he says:

“Every failure is a step advanced,
To him who will consider how it chanced.”

Wherefore, will I that this attempt be made, keeping the counsel that is mine. Thou must tell Baba Mustapha I wait without the city to reward him by my powers of reward with all that he best loveth. So, when he has failed in his attempt on Shagpat, and blows fall plenteously upon him, and he is regaled with the accustomed thwacking, as I have tasted it in this undertaking, do thou waste no further word on him, for his part is over, and as is said:

“Waste not a word in enterprise!
Against—or for—the minute flies.”

’Tis then for thee, O Feshnavat, to speed to the presence of the King in his majesty, and thou wilt find means of coming to him by a disguise. Once in the Hall of Council, challenge the tongue of contradiction to affirm Shagpat other than a bald-pate bewigged. This is for thee to do.’

Quoth Feshnavat plaintively, after thought, ‘And what becometh of me, O thou Master of the Event?’

Shibli Bagarag said, ‘The clutch of the executioner will be upon thee, O Feshnavat, and a clamouring multitude around; short breathing-time given thee, O father of Noorna, ere the time of breathing is commanded to cease. Now, in that respite the thing that will occur, ’tis for thee to see and mark; sure, never will reverse of things be more complete, and the other side of the picture more rapidly exhibited, if all go as I conceive and plot, and the trap be not premature nor too perfect for the trappers; as the poet has declared:

“Ye that intrigue, to thy slaves proper portions adapt;
Perfectest plots burst too often, for all are not apt.”

And I witness likewise to the excellence of his saying:

“To master an Event,
Study men!
The minutes are well spent
Only then.”

Also ’tis he that says:

“The man of men who knoweth men, the Man of men is he!
His army is the human race, and every foe must flee.”

So have I apportioned to thee thy work, to Baba Mustapha his; reserving to myself the work that is mine!’

Thereat Feshnavat exclaimed, ‘O Master of the Event, may I be thy sacrifice! on my head be it! and for thee to command is for me to obey! but surely, this Sword of thine that is in thy girdle, the marvellous blade—’tis alone equal to the project and the shave; and the matter might be consummated, the great thing done, even from this point whence we behold Shagpat visible, as ’twere brought forward toward us by the beams! And this Sword swayed by thee, and with thy skill and strength and the hardihood of hand that is thine, wullahy! ’twould shear him now, this moment, taking the light of Aklis for a lather.’

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Shibli Bagarag knotted the brows of impatience, crying, 'Hast thou forgotten Karaz in thy calculations? I know of a surety what this Sword will do, and I wot the oil he distilleth strengtheneth Shagpat but against common blades. Yet shall it not be spoken of me, Shibli Bagarag, that I was tripped by my own conceit; the poet counselleth:

"When for any mighty end thou hast the aid of heaven,
Mount until thy strength shall match those great means which are
given":

nor that I was overthrown in despising mine enemy, forgetful of the saying of the sage:

"Read the features of thy foe, wherever he may find thee,
Small he is, seen face to face, but thrice his size behind thee."

Wullahy! this Karaz is a Genie of craft and resources, one of a mighty stock, and I must close with Shagpat to be sure of him; and that I am not deceived by semblances, opposing guile with guile, and guile deeper than his, for that he awaiteth it not, thinking I have leaped in fancy beyond the Event, and am puffed by the after-breaths of adulation, I!—thinking I pluck the blossoms in my hunger for the fruit, that I eat the chick of the yet unlaied egg, O Feshnavat. As is said, and the warrior beareth witness to the wisdom of it:

"His weapon I'll study; my own conceal;
So with two arms to his one shall I deal."

The same also testifieth:

"'Tis folly of the hero, though resistless in the field,
To stake the victory on his steel, and fling away the shield."

And likewise:

"Examine thine armour in every joint,
For slain was the Giant, and by a pin's point."

Wah! 'tis certain there will need subtlety in this undertaking, and a plot plotted, so do thou my bidding, and fail not in the part assigned to thee.'

Now, Feshnavat was persuaded by his words, and cried, 'In diligence, discretion, and the virtues which characterize subordinates, I go, and I delay not! I will perform the thing required of me, O Master of the Event.' And he repeated in verse:

With danger beset, be the path crooked or narrow,
Thou art the bow, and I the arrow.

Then embraced he his daughter, kissing her on the forehead and the eyes, and tightening the girdle of his robe, departed, with the name of Allah on his lips, in the direction of the City.

So Shibli Bagarag called to him the two Genii, and his command was, 'Soar, ye slaves of the Sword, till the range of earth and its mountains and seas and deserts are a cluster in the orb of the eye, Shiraz conspicuous as a rose among garlands, and the ruby consorted with other gems in a setting. In Shiraz or the country adjoining ye will come upon one Baba Mustapha by name; and, if he be alone, ye may recognize him by his forlorn look and the hang of his cheeks, his vacancy as of utter abandonment; if in company, 'twill be the only talker that's he; seize on him, give him a taste of thin air, and deposit him without speech on the roof of a palace, where ye will see Feshnavat in yonder city: this do ere the shadows of the palm-tree by the well in the plain move up the mounds that enclose the fortified parts.'

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Cried Karavejis and Veejravoosh, 'To hear is to obey.'

Up into the sky, like two bright balls tossed by jugglers, the two Genii shot; and, watching them, Noorna bin Noorka said, 'My life, there is a third wanting, Ravejoura; and with aid of the three, earth could have planted no obstruction to thy stroke; but thou wert tempted by the third temptation in Aklis, and left not the Hall in triumph, the Hall of the Duping Brides!'

He answered, 'That is so, my soul; and the penalty is mine, by which I am made to employ deceits ere I strike.'

And she said, 'Tis to the generosity of Gulrevaz thou owest Karavejis and Veejravoosh; and I think she was generous, seeing thee true to me in love, she that hath sorrows!'

So he said, 'What of the sorrows of Gulrevaz? Tell me of them.'

But she said, 'Nay, O my betrothed! wouldst thou have this tongue blistered, and a consuming spark shot against this bosom?'

Then he: 'Make it clear to me.'

She put her mouth to his ear, saying, 'There is a curse on whoso telleth of things in Aklis, and to tattle of the Seven and their sister forerunneth wretchedness.'

Surely, he stooped to that fair creature, and folded her to his heart, his whole soul heaving to her; and he cried again and again, 'Shall harm hap to thee through me? by Allah, no!'

And he closed the privileged arm of the bridegroom round her waist, that had the yieldingness of the willow-branchlet, the flowingness of the summer sea-wave, and seemed as 'twere melting honey-like at the first gentle pressure; she leaning her head shyly on his shoulder, yet confiding in his faithfulness; it was that she was shy of the great bliss in her bosom, and was made timid by the fervour of her affection; as is sung:

Deeper than the source of blushes
Is the power that makes them start;
Up in floods the red stream rushes,
At one whisper of the heart.

And it is sung in words present to the youth as he surveyed her:

O beauty of the bride! O beauty of the bride!
Her bashful joys like serpents sting her tenderness to
tears:
Her hopes are sleeping eagles in the shining of the spheres;



O beauty of the bride! O beauty of the bride!
And she's a lapping antelope that from her image flees;
And she's a dove caught in two hands, to pant as she shall
please;

O beauty of the bride! O beauty of the bride!
Like torrents over Paradise her lengthy tresses roll:
She moves as doth a swaying rose, and chides her hasty soul;
The thing she will, that will she not, yet can no will control
O beauty, beauty, beauty of the bride!

They were thus together, Abarak leaning under one wing of Koorookh for shade up the slope of the hill, and Shibli Bagarag called to him, 'Ho, Abarak! look if there be aught impending over the City.'

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So he arose and looked, crying, 'One with plunging legs, high up in air over the City, between two bright bodies.' Shibli Bagarag exclaimed, 'Tis well! The second chapter of the Event is opened; so call it, thou that tellest of the Shaving of Shagpat. It will be the shortest.'

Then he said, 'The shadow of yonder palm is now a slanted spear up the looped wall of the City. Now, the time of Shagpat's triumph, and his greatest majesty, will be when yonder walls chase the shadow of the palm up this hill; and then will Baba Mustapha be joining the chorus of creatures that shriek toward even ere they snooze. There's not an ape in the woods, nor hyaena in the forest, nor birds on the branches, nor frogs in the marsh that will outnoise Baba Mustapha under the thong! Wullahy, 'twill grieve his soul in aftertime when he sitteth secure in honours, courted, with a thousand ears at his bidding, that so much breath 'scaped him without toll of the tongue! But as the poet says truly:

"The chariot of Events lifteth many dusty heels,
And many, high and of renown, it crusheth with its wheels."

Wah! I have had my share of the thong, and am I, Master of the Event, to be squeamish in attaining an end by its means? Nay, by this Sword!

Thereat, he strode once again to the summit of the hill, and in a moment the Genii fronted him like two shot arrows quivering from the flight. So he cried, 'It is done?'

They answered, 'In faithfulness.'

So he beckoned to Noorna, and she came forward swiftly to him, exclaiming, 'I read the plot, and the thing required of me; so say nought, but embrace me ere I leave thee, my betrothed, my master!'

He embraced her, and led her to where the Genii stood. Then said he to the Genii, 'Convey her to the City, O ye slaves of the Sword, and watch over her there. If ye let but an evil wind ruffle the hair of her head, lo! I sever ye with a stroke that shaketh the under worlds. Remain by her till the shrieks of Baba Mustapha greet ye, and then will follow commotion among the crowd, and cries for Shagpat to show himself to the people, cries also of death to Feshnavat; and there will be an assembly in the King's Hall of Justice; thither lead ye my betrothed, and watch over her.' And he said to Noorna, 'Thou knowest my design?'

So she said, 'When condemnation is passed on Feshnavat, that I appear in the hall as bride of Shagpat, and so rescue him that is my father.' And she cried, 'Oh, fair delightful time that is coming! my happiness and thy honour on earth dateth from it. Farewell, O my betrothed, beloved youth! Eyes of mine! these Genii will be by, and there's no cause



for fear or sorrow, and 'tis for thee to look like morning that speeds the march of light.
Thou, my betrothed, art thou not all that enslaveth the heart of woman?'

Cried Shibli Bagarag, 'And thou, O Noorna, all that enraptureth the soul of man! Allah
keep thee, my life!'

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Lo! while they were wasting the rich love in their hearts, the Genii rose up with Noorna, and she, waving her hand to him, was soon distant and as the white breast of a bird turned to the sun. Then went he to where Abarak was leaning, and summoned Koorookh, and the twain mounted him, and rose up high over the City of Shagpat to watch the ripening of the Event, as a vulture watcheth over the desert.

THE DISH OF POMEGRANATE GRAIN

Now, in the City of Shagpat, Kadza, spouse of Shagpat, she that had belaboured Shibli Bagarag, had a dream while these things were doing; and it was a dream of danger and portent to the glory of her eyes, Shagpat. So, at the hour when he was revealed to Shibli Bagarag, made luminous by the beams of Aklis, Kadza went to an inner chamber, and greased her hands and her eyelids, and drank of a phial, and commenced tugging at a brass ring fixed in the floor, and it yielded and displayed an opening, over which she stooped the upper half of her leanness, and pitching her note high, called 'Karaz!' After that, she rose and retreated from the hole hastily, and in the winking of an eye it was filled, as 'twere a pillar of black smoke, by the body of the Genie, he breathing hard with mighty travel. So he cried to her between his pantings and puffings, 'Speak! where am I wanted, and for what?'

Now, Kadza was affrighted at the terribleness of his manner, and the great smell of the Genie was an intoxication in her nostril, so that she reeled and could just falter out, 'Danger to the Identical!'

Then he, in a voice like claps of thunder, 'Out with it!'

She answered beseechingly, 'Tis a dream I had, O Genie; a dream of danger to him.'

While she spake, the Genie clenched his fists and stamped so that the palace shook and the earth under it, exclaiming, 'O abominable Kadza! a dream is it? another dream? Wilt thou cease dreaming awhile, thou silly woman? Know I not he that's powerful against us is in Aklis, crowned ape, and that his spells are gone? And I was distilling drops to defy the Sword and strengthen Shagpat from assault, yet bringest thou me from my labour by the Putrid Sea with thy accursed dream!' Thereat, he frowned and shot fire at her from his eyes, so that she singed, and the room thickened with a horrible smell of burning. She feared greatly and trembled, but he cooled himself against the air, crying presently in a diminished voice, 'Let's hear this dream, thou foolish Kadza! 'Tis as well to hear it. Probably Rabesqurat hath sent thee some sign from Aklis, where she ferryeth a term. What's that saying:

"A woman's at the core of every plot man plotteth,
And like an ill-reared fruit, first at the core it rotteth."

So, out with it, thou Kadza!

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Now, the urgency of that she had dreamed overcame fear in Kadza, and she said, 'O great Genie and terrible, my dream was this. Lo! I saw an assemblage of the beasts of the forests and them that inhabit wild places. And there was the elephant and the rhinoceros and the hippopotamus, and the camel and the camelopard, and the serpent and the striped tiger; also the antelope, the hyena, the jackal, and above them, eminent in majesty, the lion. Surely, he sat as 'twere on a high seat, and they like suppliants thronging the presence: this I saw, the heart on my ribs beating for Shagpat. And there appeared among the beasts a monkey all ajoint with tricks, jerking with malice, he looking as 'twere hungry for the doing of things detestable; and the lion scorned him, and I marked him ridicule the lion: 'twas so. And the lion began to scowl, and the other beasts marked the displeasure of the lion. Then chased they that monkey from the presence, and for awhile he was absent, and the lion sat in his place gravely, with calm, receiving homage of the other beasts; and down to his feet came the eagle that's lord of air, and before him kneeled the great elephant, and the subtle serpent eyed him with awe. But soon did that monkey, the wretched animal! reappear, and there was no peace for the lion, he worrying till close within stretch of the lion's paw! Wah! the lion might have crushed him, but that he's magnanimous. And so it was that as the monkey advanced the lion roared to him, "Begone!"

'And the monkey cried, "Who commandeth?"

'So the lion roared, "The King of beasts and thy King!"

'Then that monkey cried, "Homage to the King of beasts and my King! Allah keep him in his seat, and I would he were visible."

'So the lion roared, "He sitteth here acknowledged, thou graceless animal! and he's before thee apparent."

'Then the monkey affected eagerness, and gazed about him, and peered on this beast and on that, exclaiming like one that's injured and under slight, "What's this I've done, and wherein have I offended, that he should be hidden from me when pointed out?"

'So the lion roared, "'Tis I where I sit, thou offensive monkey!"

'Then that monkey in the upper pitch of amazement, "Thou! Is it for created thing to acknowledge a king without a tail? And, O beasts of the forest and the wilderness, how say ye? Am I to blame that I bow not to one that hath it not?"

'Upon that, the lion rose, and roared in the extreme of wrath; but the word he was about to utter was checked in him, for 'twas manifest that where he would have lashed a tail he shook a stump, wagging it as the dog doth. Lo! when the lion saw that, the majesty melted from him, and in a moment the plumpness of content and prosperity forsook him,

so that his tawny skin hung flabbily and his jaw drooped, and shame deprived him of stateliness; abashed was he! Now, seeing the lion shamed in this manner,

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my heart beat violently for Shagpat, so that I awoke with the strength of its beating, and 'twas hidden from me whether the monkey was punished by the lion, or exalted by the other beasts in his place, or how came it that the lion's tail was lost, witched from him by that villain of mischief, the monkey; but, O great Genie, I knew there was a lion among men, revered, and with enemies; that lion, he that espoused me and my glory, Shagpat! 'Twas enough to know that and tremble at the omen of my dream, O Genie. Wherefore I thought it well to summon thee here, that thou mightest set a guard over Shagpat, and shield him from the treacheries that beset him.'

When Kadza had ceased speaking, the Genie glowered at her awhile in silence. Then said he, 'What creature is that, Kadza, which tormenteth like the tongue of a woman, is small as her pretensions to virtue, and which showeth how the chapters of her history should be read by the holy ones, even in its manner of movement?'

Cried Kadza, 'The flea that hoppeth!'

So he said, 'Tis well! Hast thou strength to carry one of my weight, O Kadza?'

She answered in squeamishness, 'I, wullahy! I'm but a woman, Genie, though the wife of Shagpat: and to carry thee is for the camel and the elephant and the horse.'

Then he, 'Tighten thy girdle, and when tightened, let a loose loop hang from it.'

She did that, and he gave her a dark powder in her hand, saying, 'Swallow the half of this, and what remaineth mix with water, and sprinkle over thee.'

That did she, and thereupon he exclaimed, 'Now go, and thy part is to move round Shagpat; and a wind will strike thee from one quarter, and from which quarter it striketh is the one of menace and danger to Shagpat.'

So Kadza was diligent in doing what the Genie commanded, and sought for Shagpat, and moved round him many times; but no wind struck her. She went back to the Genie, and told him of this, and the Genie cried, 'What? no wind? not one from Aklis? Then will Shagpat of a surety triumph, and we with him.'

Now, there was joy on the features of Kadza and Karaz, till suddenly he said, 'Halt in thy song! How if there be danger and menace above? and 'tis the thing that may be.'

Then he seized Kadza, and slung her by him, and went into the air, and up it till the roofs of the City of Shagpat were beneath their feet, all on them visible. And under an awning, on the roof of a palace, there was the Vizier Feshnavat and Baba Mustapha, they ear to lip in consultation, and Baba Mustapha brightening with the matter revealed

to him, and bobbing his head, and breaking on the speech of the Vizier. Now, when he saw them the Genie blew from his nostrils a double stream of darkness which curled in a thick body round and round him, and Kadza slung at his side was enveloped in it, as with folds of a huge serpent. Then the Genie hung still, and lo! two radiant figures

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swept toward the roof he watched, and between them Noorna bin Noorka, her long dark hair borne far backward, and her robe of silken stuff fluttering and straining on the pearl buttons as she flew. There was that in her beauty and the silver clearness of her temples and her eyes, and her cheeks, and her neck, and chin and ankles, that made the Genie shudder with love of her, and he was nigh dropping Kadza to the ground, forgetful of all save Noorna. When he recovered, and it was by tightening his muscles till he was all over hard knots, Noorna was seated on a cushion, and descending he heard her speak his name. Then sniffed he the air, and said to Kadza, 'O spouse of Shagpat, a plot breweth, and the odour of it is in my nostril. Fearest thou a scorching for his sake thou adorest, the miracle of men?'

She answered, 'On my head be it, and my eyes!'

He said, 'I shall alight thee behind the pole of awning on yonder roof, where are the two bright figures and the dingy one, and the Vizier Feshnavat and Noorna bin Noorka. A flame will spring up severing thee from them; but thou'rt secure from it by reason of the powder I gave thee, all save the hair that's on thee. Thou'lt have another shape than that which is thine, even that of a slave of Noorna bin Noorka, and say to her when she asketh thy business with her, "O my mistress, let the storm gather-in the storm-bird when it would surprise men." Do this, and thy part's done, O Kadza!'

Thereupon he swung a circle, and alighted her behind the pole of awning on the roof, and vanished, and the circle of flame rose up, and Kadza passed through it slightly scorched, and answered to the question of Noorna, 'O my mistress, let the storm gather-in the storm-bird when it would surprise men.' Now, when Noorna beheld her, and heard her voice, she pierced the disguise, and was ware of the wife of Shagpat, and glanced her large eyes over Kadza from head to sole till they rested on the loose loop in her girdle. Seeing that, she rose up, and stretched her arms, and spread open the palm of her hand, and slapped Kadza on the cheek and ear a hard slap, so that she heard bells; and ere she ceased to hear them, another, so that Kadza staggered back and screamed, and Feshnavat was moved to exclaim, 'What has the girl, thy favourite, offended in, O my daughter?'

So Noorna continued slapping Kadza, and cried, 'Is she not sluttish? and where's the point of decency established in her, this Luloo? Shall her like appear before thee and me with loose girdle!'

Then she pointed to the girdle, and Kadza tightened the loose loop, and fell upon the ground to avoid the slaps, and Noorna knelt by her, and clutched at a portion of her dress and examined it, peering intently; and she caught up another part, and knotted it as if to crush a living creature, hunting over her, and grasping at her; and so it was that while she tore strips from the garments of Kadza, Feshnavat jumped suddenly in wrath,

and pinched over his garments, crying, 'Tis unbearable! 'Tis I know not what other than a flea that persecuteth me.'

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Upon that, Noorna ran to him, and while they searched together for the flea, Baba Mustapha fidgeted and worried in his seat, lurching to the right and to the left, muttering curses; and it was evident he too was persecuted, and there was no peace on the roof of that palace, but pinching and howling and stretching of limbs, and curses snarled in the throat and imprecations on the head of the tormenting flea. Surely, the soul of Kadza rejoiced, for she knew the flea was Karaz, whom she had brought with her in the loose loop of her girdle through the circle of flame which was a barrier against him. She glistened at the triumph of the flea, but Noorna strode to her, and took her to the side of the roof, and pitched her down it, and closed the passage to her. Then ran she to Karavejis and Veejravoosh, whispering in the ear of each, 'No word of the Sword?' and afterward aloud, 'What think ye will be the term of the staying of my betrothed in Aklis, crowned ape?'

They answered, 'O pearl of the morn, crowned ape till such time as Shagpat be shaved.'

So she beat her breast, crying, 'Oh, utter stagnation, till Shagpat be shaved! and oh, stoppage in the tide of business, dense cloud upon the face of beauty, and frost on the river of events, till Shagpat be shaved! And oh! my betrothed, crowned ape in Aklis till Shagpat be shaved!'

Then she lifted her hands and arms, and said, 'To him where he is, ye Genii! and away, for he needeth comfort.'

Thereat the glittering spirits dissolved and thinned, and were as taper gleams of curved light across the water in their ascent of the heavens. When they were gone Noorna, exclaimed, 'Now for the dish of pomegrante grain, O Baba Mustapha, and let nothing delay us further.'

Quoth Baba Mustapha, "'Tis ordered, O my princess and fair mistress, from the confectioner's; and with it the sleepy drug from the seller of medicaments—accursed flea!'

Now, she laughed, and said, 'What am I, O Baba Mustapha?'

So he said, 'Not thou, O bright shooter of beams, but I, wullahy! I'm but a bundle of points through the pertinacity of this flea! a house of irritabilities! a mere mass of fretfulness! and I've no thought but for the chasing of this unlucky flea: was never flea like it in the world before this flea; and 'tis a flea to anger the holy ones, and make the saintly Dervish swear at such a flea.' He wriggled and curled where he sat, and Noorna cried, 'What! shall we be defeated by a flea, we that would shave Shagpat, and release this city and the world from bondage?' And she looked up to the sky that was then without a cloud, blazing with the sun on his mid seat, and exclaimed, 'O star of Shagpat!

wilt thou constantly be in the ascendant, and defeat us, the liberators of men, with a flea?’

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Now, whenever one of the twain, Baba Mustapha and the Vizier Feshnavat, commenced speaking of the dish of pomegranate grain, the torment of the flea took all tongue from him, and was destruction to the gravity of council and deliberation. The dish of pomegranate grain was brought to them by slaves, and the drug to induce sleep, yet neither could say aught concerning it, they were as jointy grasshoppers through the action of the flea, and the torment of the flea became a madness, they shrieking, 'Tis now with thee! 'Tis now with me! Fires of the damned on this flea!' In their extremity, they called to Allah for help, but no help came, save when they abandoned all speech concerning the dish of pomegranate grain, then were they for a moment eased of the flea. So Noorna recognized the presence of her enemy Karaz, and his malicious working; and she went and fetched a jar brimmed with water for the bath, and stirred it with her forefinger, and drew on it a flame from the rays of the sun till there rose up from the jar a white thick smoke. She rustled her raiment, making the wind of it collect round Baba Mustapha and Feshnavat, and did this till the sweat streamed from their brows and bodies, and they were sensible of peace and the absence of the flea. Then she whisked away the smoke, and they were attended by slaves with fresh robes, and were as new men, and sat together over the dish of pomegranate grain, praising the wisdom of Noorna and her power. Then Baba Mustapha revived in briskness, and cried, 'Here the dish! and 'tis in my hands an instrument, an instrument of vengeance! and one to endow the skilful wielder of it with glory. And 'tis as I designed it,—sweet, seasoned, savoury,—a flattery to the eye and no deceiver to the palate. Wah! and such an instrument in the hands of the discerning and the dexterous, and the discreet and the judicious, and them gifted with determination, is't not such as sufficeth for the overturning of empires and systems, O my mistress, fair one, sapphire of this city? And is't not written that I shall beguile Shagpat by its means, and master the Event, and shame the King of Oolb and his Court? And I shall then sit in state among men, and surround myself with adornments and with slaves, mute, that speak not save at the signal, and are as statues round the cushions of their lord—that's myself. And I shall surround myself with the flatteries of wealth, and walk bewildered in silks and stuffs and perfumeries; and sweet young beauties shall I have about me, antelopes of grace, as I like them, and select them, long-eyed, lazy, fond of listening, and with bashful looks that timidly admire the dignity that's in man.'

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While he was prating Noorna took the dish in her lap, and folded her silvery feet beneath her, and commenced whipping into it the drug: and she whipped it dexterously and with equal division among the grain, whipping it and the flea with it, but she feigned not to mark the flea and whipped harder. Then took she colour and coloured it saffron, and laid over it gold-leaf, so that it glittered and was an enticing sight; and the dish was of gold, crusted over with devices and patterns, and heads of golden monsters, a ravishment of skill in him that executed it, cumbrous with ornate golden workmanship; likewise there were places round the dish for sticks of perfume and cups carved for the storing of perfumed pellets, and into these Noorna put myrrh and ambergris and rich incenses, aloes, sandalwood, prepared essences, divers keen and sweet scents. Then when all was in readiness, she put the dish upon the knee of Baba Mustapha, and awoke him from his babbling reverie with a shout, and said, 'An instrument verily, O Baba Mustapha! and art thou a cat to shave Shagpat with that tongue of thine?'

Now, he arose and made the sign of obedience and said, 'Tis well, O lady of grace and bright wit! and now for the cap of Shiraz and the Persian robe, and my twenty slaves and seven to follow me to the mansion of Shagpat. I'll do: I'll act.'

So she motioned to a slave to bring the cap of Shiraz and the Persian robe, and in these Baba Mustapha arrayed himself. Then called he for the twenty-and-seven slaves, and they were ranged, some to go before, some to follow him. And he was exalted, and made the cap of Shiraz nod in his conceit, crying, 'Am I not leader in this complot? Wullahy! all bow to me and acknowledge it.' Then, to check himself, he called out sternly to the slaves, 'Ho ye! forward to the mansion of Shagpat; and pass at a slow pace through the streets of the city—solemnly, gravely, as before a potentate; then will the people inquire of ye, Who't is ye marshal, and what mighty one? and ye will answer, He's from the court of Shiraz, nothing less than a Vizier—bearing homage to Shagpat, even this dish of pomegranate grain.'

So they said, 'To hear is to obey.'

Upon that he waved his hand and stalked majestically, and they descended from the roof into the street, criers running in front to clear the way. When Baba Mustapha was hidden from view by a corner of the street, Noorna shrank in her white shoulders and laughed, and was like a flashing pearl as she swayed and dimpled with laughter. And she cried, 'True are those words of the poet, and I testify to them in the instance of Baba Mustapha:

"With feathers of the cock, I'll fashion a vain creature;
With feathers of the owl, I'll make a judge in feature";

Is not the barber elate and lofty? He goeth forth to the mastery of this Event as go many, armed with nought other than their own conceit: and 'tis written:

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"Fools from their fate seek not to urge:
The coxcomb carrieth his scourge."

So Feshnavat smoothed his face, and said, 'Is't not also written?—

"Oft may the fall of fools make wise men moan!
Too often hangs the house on one loose stone!"

'Tis so, O Noorna, my daughter, and I am as a reed shaken by the wind of apprehensiveness, and doubt in me is a deep root as to the issue of this undertaking, for the wrath of the King will be terrible, and the clamour of the people soundeth in my ears already. If Shibli Bagarag fail in one stroke, where be we? 'Tis certain I knew not the might in Shagpat when I strove with him, and he's powerful beyond the measure of man's subtlety; and yonder flies a rook without fellow—an omen; and all's ominous, and ominous of ill: and I marked among the troop of slaves that preceded Baba Mustapha one that squinted, and that's an omen; and, O my daughter, I counsel that thou by thy magic speed us to some remote point in the Caucasus, where we may abide the unravelling of this web securely, one way or the other way. 'Tis my counsel, O Noorna.'

Then she, 'Abandon my betrothed? and betray him on the very stroke of the Sword? and diminish him by a withdrawal of that faith in his right wrist which strengtheneth it more than Karavejis and Veejravoosh wound round it in coils?' And she leaned her head, and cried, 'Hark! hear'st thou? there's shouting in the streets of Shiraz and of Shagpat! Shall we merit the punishment of Shahpesh the Persian on Khipil the builder, while the Event is mastering? I'll mark this interview between Baba Mustapha and Shagpat; and do thou, O my father, rest here on this roof till the King's guard of horsemen and soldiers of the law come hither for thee, and go with them sedately, fearing nought, for I shall be by thee in the garb of an old woman; and preserve thy composure in the presence of the King and Shagpat exalted, and allow not the thing that happeneth let fly from thee the shaft of speech, but remain a slackened bow till the strength of my betrothed is testified, fearing nought, for fear is that which defeateth men, and 'tis declared in a distich,—

"The strongest weapon one can see
In mortal hands is constancy."

And for us to flee now would rank us with that King described by the poet:

"A king of Ind there was who fought a fight
From the first gleam of morn till fall of night;
But when the royal tent his generals sought,
Proclaiming victory, fled was he who fought.
Despair possessed them, till they chanced to spy
A Dervish that paced on with downward eye;

They questioned of the King; he answer'd slow,
'Ye fought but one, the King a double, foe.'"

And, O my father, they interpreted of this that the King had been vanquished, he that was victor, by the phantom army of his fears.'

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Now, the Vizier cried, 'Be the will of Allah achieved and consummated!' and he was silenced by her wisdom and urgency, and sat where he was, diverting not the arch on his brow from its settled furrow. He was as one that thirsteth, and whose eye hath marked a snake of swift poison by the water, so thirsted he for the Event, yet hung with dread from advancing; but Noorna bin Noorka busied herself about the roof, drawing circles to witness the track of an enemy, and she clapped her hands and cried, 'Luloo!' and lo, a fair slave-girl that came to her and stood by with bent head, like a white lily by a milk-white antelope; so Noorna clouded her brow a moment, as when the moon darkeneth behind a scud, and cried, 'Speak! art thou in league with Karaz, girl?'

Luloo strained her hands to her temples, exclaiming, 'With the terrible Genie?—I?—in league with him? my mistress, surely the charms I wear, and the amulets, I wear them as a protection from that Genie, and a safeguard, he that carrieth off the maidens and the young sucklings, walking under the curse of mothers.'

Said Noorna, 'O Luloo, have I boxed those little ears of thine this day?'

The fair slave-girl smiled a smile of submissive tenderness, and answered, 'Not this day, nor once since Luloo was rescued from the wicked old merchant by thy overbidding, and was taken to the arms of a wise kind sister, wiser and kinder than any she had been stolen from, she that is thy slave for ever.'

She said this weeping, and Noorna mused, 'Twas as I divined, that wretched Kadza: her grief 's to come!' Then spake she aloud as to herself, 'Knew I, or could one know, I should this day be a bride?' And, hearing that, Luloo shrieked, 'Thou a bride, and torn from me, and we two parted? and I, a poor drooping tendril, left to wither? for my life is round thee and worthless away from thee, O cherisher of the fallen flower.'

And she sobbed out wailful verses and words, broken and without a meaning; but Noorna caught her by the arm and swung her, and bade her fetch on the instant a robe of blue, and pile in her chamber robes of amber and saffron and grey, bridal-robes of many-lighted silks, plum-coloured, peach-coloured, of the colour of musk mixed with pale gold, together with bridal ornaments and veils of the bride, and a jewelled circlet for the brow. When this was done, Noorna went with Luloo to her chamber, attended by slave-girls, and arrayed herself in the first dress of blue, and swayed herself before the mirror, and rattled the gold pieces in her hair and on her neck with laughter. And Luloo was bewildered, and forgot her tears to watch the gaiety of her mistress; and lo! Noorna, made her women take off one set of ornaments with every dress, and with every dress she put on another set; and after she had gone the round of the different dresses, she went to the bathroom with Luloo, and at her bidding Luloo entered the bath beside Noorna, and the twain dipped and shouldered in the blue water, and were as when a single star is by the full moon on a bright midnight pouring lustre about. And Noorna splashed Luloo, and said, 'This night we shall not sleep together, O Luloo, nor lie close, thy bosom on mine.'

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Thereat, Luloo wept afresh, and cried, 'Ah, cruel! and 'tis a sweet thought for thee, and thou'lt have no mind for me, tossing on my hateful lonely couch.'

Tenderly Noorna eyed Luloo, and the sprinkles of the bath fell with the tears of both, and they clung together, and were like the lily and its bud on one stalk in a shower. Then, when Noorna had spent her affection, she said, 'O thou of the long downward lashes, thy love was constant when I stood under a curse and was an old woman—a hag! Carest thou so little to learn the name of him that claimeth me?'

Luloo replied, 'I thought of no one save myself and my loss, O my lost pearl; happy is he, a youth of favour. Oh, how I shall hate him that taketh thee from me. Tell me now his name, O sovereign of hearts!'

So Noorna smoothed the curves and corners of her mouth and calmed her countenance, crying in a deep tone and a voice as of reverence, 'Shagpat!'

Now, at that name Luloo drank in her breath and was awed, and sank in herself, and had just words to ask, 'Hath he demanded thee again in marriage, O my mistress?'

Said Noorna, 'Even so.'

Luloo muttered, 'Great is the Dispenser of our fates!'

And she spake no further, but sighed and took napkins and summoned the slave-girls, and arrayed Noorna silently in the robe of blue and bridal ornaments. Then Noorna said to them that thronged about her, 'Put on, each of ye, a robe of white, ye that are maidens, and a fillet of blue, and a sash of saffron, and abide my coming.'

And she said to Luloo, 'Array thyself in a robe of blue, even as mine, and let trinkets lurk in thy tresses, and abide my coming.'

Then went she forth from them, and veiled her head and swathed her figure in raiment of a coarse white stuff, and was as the moon going behind a hill of dusky snow; and she left the house, and passed along the streets and by the palaces, till she came to the palace of her father, now filled by Shagpat. Before the palace grouped a great concourse and a multitude of all ages and either sex in that city, despite the blaze and the heat. Like roaring of a sea beyond the mountains was the noise that issued from them, and their eyes were a fire of beams against the portal of the palace. Now, she saw in the crowd one Shafrac, a shoemaker, and addressed him, saying, 'O Shafrac, the shoemaker, what's this assembly and how got together? for the poet says:

"Ye string not such assemblies in the street,
Save when some high Event should be complete."



He answered, "Tis an Event complete. Wullahy! the deputation from Shiraz to Shagpat, and the submission of that vain city to the might of Shagpat.' And he asked her, jestingly, 'Art thou a witch, to guess that, O veiled and virtuous one?'

Quoth she, 'I read the thing that cometh ere 'tis come, and I read danger to Shagpat in this deputation from Shiraz, and this dish of pomegranate grain.'

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So Shafrac cried, 'By the beard of my fathers and that of Shagpat! let's speak of this to Zeel, the garlic-seller.'

He broadened to one that was by him, and said, 'O Zeel, what's thy mind? Here's a woman, a wise woman, a witch, and she sees danger to Shagpat in this deputation from Shiraz and this dish of pomegranate grain.'

Now, Zeel screwed his visage and gazed up into his forehead, and said, "Twere best to consult with Bootlbac, the drum-beater.'

The two then called to Bootlbac, the drum-beater, and told him the matter, and Bootlbac pondered, and tapped his brow and beat on his stomach, and said, 'Krooz el Krazawik, the carrier, is good in such a case.'

Now, from Krooz el Krazawik, the carrier, they went to Dob, the confectioner; and from Dob, the confectioner, to Azawool, the builder; and from Azawool, the builder, to Tcheik, the collector of taxes; and each referred to some other, till perplexity triumphed and was a cloud over them, and the words, 'Danger to Shagpat,' went about like bees, and were canvassing, when suddenly a shrill voice rose from the midst, dominating other voices, and it was that of Kadza, and she cried, 'Who talks here of danger to Shagpat, and what wretch is it?'

Now, Tcheik pointed out Azawool, and Azawool Dob, and Dob Krooz el Krazawik, and he Bootlbac, and the drum-beater shrugged his shoulder at Zeel, and Zeel stood away from Shafrac, and Shafrac seized Noorna and shouted, "Tis she, this woman, the witch!'

Kadza fronted Noorna, and called to her, 'O thing of infamy, what's this talk of thine concerning danger to our glory, Shagpat?'

Then Noorna replied, 'I say it, O Kadza! and I say it; there's danger threateneth him, and from that deputation and that dish of pomegranate grain.'

Now, Kadza laughed a loose laugh, and jeered at Noorna, crying, 'Danger to Shagpat! he that's attended by Genii, and watched over by the greatest of them, day and night incessantly?'

And Noorna said, 'I ask pardon of the Power that seeth, and of thee, if I be wrong. Wah! am I not also of them that watch over Shagpat? So then let thou and I go into the palace and examine the doings of this deputation and this dish of pomegranate grain.'

Now, Kadza remembered the scene on the roofs of the Vizier Feshnavat, and relaxed in her look of suspicion, and said, "Tis well! Let's in to them.'

Thereupon the twain threaded through the crowd and locked at the portals of the palace, and it was opened to them and they entered, and lo! the hand that opened the

portals was the hand of a slave of the Sword, and against corners of the Court leaned slaves silly with slumber. So Kadza went up to them, and beat them, and shook them, and they yawned and mumbled, 'Excellent grain! good grain! the grain of Shiraz!' And she beat them with what might was hers, till some fell sideways and some forward, still mumbling, 'Excellent pomegranate grain!' Kadza was beside herself with anger and vexation at them, tearing them and cuffing them; but Noorna cried, 'O Kadza! what said I? there's danger to Shagpat in this dish of pomegranate grain! and what's that saying:

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“’Tis much against the Master’s wish
That slaves too greatly praise his dish.”

Wullahy! I like not this talk of the grain of Shiraz.’

Now, while Noorna spake, the eyes of Kadza became like those of the starved wild-cat, and she sprang off and along the marble of the Court, and clawed a passage through the air and past the marble pillars of the palace toward the first room of reception, Noorna following her. And in the first room were slaves leaning and lolling like them about the Court, and in the second room and in the third room, silent all of them and senseless. So at this sight the spark of suspicion became a mighty flame in the bosom of Kadza, and horror burst out at all ends of her, and she shuddered, and cried, ‘What for us, and where’s our hope if Shagpat be shorn, and he lopped of the Identical, shamed like the lion of my dream!’

And Noorna clasped her hands, and said, ‘’Tis that I fear! Seek for him, O Kadza!’

So Kadza ran to a window and looked forth over the garden of the palace, and it was a fair garden with the gleam of a fountain and watered plants and cool arches of shade, thick bowers, fragrant alleys, long sheltered terraces, and beyond the garden a summer-house of marble fanned by the broad leaves of a palm. Now, when Kadza had gazed a moment, she shrieked, ‘He’s there! Shagpat! giveth he not the light of a jewel to the house that holdeth him? Awahy! and he’s witched there for an ill purpose.’

Then tore she from that room like a mad wild thing after its stolen cubs, and sped along corridors of the palace, and down the great flight of steps into the garden and across the garden, knocking over the ablution-pots in her haste; and Noorna had just strength to withhold her from dashing through the doors of the summer-house to come upon Shagpat, she straining and crying, ‘He’s there, I say, O wise woman! Shagpat! let’s into him.’

But Noorna clung to her, and spake in her ear, ‘Wilt thou blow the fire that menaces him, O Kadza? and what are two women against the assailants of such a mighty one as he?’ Then said she, ‘Watch, rather, and avail thyself of yonder window by the blue-painted pillar.’

So Kadza crept up to the blue-painted pillar which was on the right side of the porch, and the twain peered through the window. Noorna beheld the Dish of Pomegranate Grain; and it was on the floor, empty of the grain, and Baba Mustapha was by it alone making a lather, and he was twitching his mouth and his legs, and flinging about his arms, and Noorna heard him mutter wrathfully, ‘O accursed flea! art thou at me again?’ And she heard him mutter as in anguish, ‘No peace for thee, O pertinacious flea! and my steadiness of hand will be gone, now when I have him safe as the hawk his prey, mine enemy, this Shagpat that abused me: thou abominable flea! And, O thou flea, wilt

thou, vile thing! hinder me from mastering the Event, and releasing this people and the world from enchantment and bondage? And shall I fail to become famous to the ages and the times because of such as thee, flea?’

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So Kadza whispered to Noorna, 'What's that he's muttering? Is't of Shagpat? for I mark him not here, nor the light by which he's girt.'

She answered, 'Listen with the ear and the eye and all the senses.'

Now, presently they heard Baba Mustapha say in a louder tone, like one that is secure from interruption, 'Two lathers, and this the third! a potent lather! and I wot there's not a hair in this world resisteth the sweep of my blade over such a lather as—Ah! flea of iniquity and abomination! what! am I doomed to thy torments?—so let's spread! Lo! this lather, is't not the pride of Shiraz? and the polish and smoothness it sheddeth, is't not roseate? my invention! as the poet says,—O accursed flea! now the knee-joint, now the knee-cap, and 'tis but a hop for thee to the arm-pit. Fires of the pit without bottom seize thee! is no place sacred from thee, and art thou a restless soul, infernal flea? So then, peace awhile, and here's for the third lather.'

While he was speaking Baba Mustapha advanced to a large white object that sat motionless, upright like a snow-mound on a throne of cushions, and commenced lathering. When she saw that, Kadza tossed up her head and her throat, and a shriek was coming from her, for she was ware of Shagpat; but Noorna stifled the shriek, and clutched her fast, whispering, 'He's safe if thou have but patience, thou silly Kadza! and the flea will defeat this fellow if thou spoil it not.'

So Kadza said, looking up, 'Is 't seen of Allah, and be the Genii still in their depths?' but she constrained herself, peering and perking out her chin, and lifting one foot and the other foot, as on furnaces of fire in the excess of the fury she smothered. And lo, Baba Mustapha worked diligently, and Shagpat was behind an exulting lather, even as one pelted with wheaten flour-balls or balls of powdery perfume, and his hairiness was as branches of the forest foliage bent under a sudden fall of overwhelming snow that filleth the pits and sharpeneth the wolves with hunger, and teacheth new cunning to the fox. A fox was Baba Mustapha in his stratagems, and a wolf in the fierceness of his setting upon Shagpat. Surely he drew forth the blade that was to shear Shagpat, and made with it in the air a preparatory sweep and flourish; and the blade frolicked and sent forth a light, and seemed eager for Shagpat. So Baba Mustapha addressed his arm to the shearing, and inclined gently the edge of the blade, and they marked him let it slide twice to a level with the head of Shagpat, and at the third time it touched, and Kadza howled, but from Baba Mustapha there burst a howl to madden the beasts; and he flung up his blade, and wrenched open his robe, crying, 'A flea was it to bite in that fashion? Now, I swear by the Merciful, a fang like that's common to tigers and hyaenas and ferocious animals.'

Then looked he for the mark of the bite, plaining of its pang, and he could find the mark nowhere. So, as he caressed himself, eyeing Shagpat sheepishly and with gathering awe, Noorna said hurriedly to Kadza, 'Away now, and call them in, the crowd about the palace, that they may behold the triumph of Shagpat, for 'tis ripe, O Kadza!'

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And Kadza replied, 'Thou'rt a wise woman, and I'll have thee richly rewarded. Lo, I'm as a camel lightened of fifty loads, and the glory of Shagpat see I as a new sun rising in the desert. Wullahy! thou'rt wise, and I'll do thy bidding.'

Now, she went flying back to the palace, and called shrill calls to the crowd, and collected them in the palace, and headed them through the garden, and it was when Baba Mustapha had summoned courage for a second essay, and was in the act of standing over Shagpat to operate on him, that the crowd burst the doors, and he was quickly seized by them, and tugged at and hauled at and pummelled, and torn and vituperated, and as a wrecked vessel on stormy waters, plunging up and down with tattered sails, when the crew fling overboard freight and ballast and provision. Surely his time would have been short with that mob, but Noorna made Kadza see the use of examining him before the King, and there were in that mob sheikhs and fakirs, holy men who listened to the words of Kadza, and exerted themselves to rescue Baba Mustapha, and quieted the rage that was prevailing, and bore Baba Mustapha with them to the great palace of the King, which was in the centre of that City. Now, when the King heard of the attempt on Shagpat, and the affair of the Pomegranate Grain, he gave orders for the admission of the people, as many of them as could be contained in the Hall of Justice: and he set a guard over Baba Mustapha, and commanded that Shagpat should be brought to the palace even as he then was, and with the lather on him. So the regal mandate went forth, and Shagpat was brought in state on cushions, and the potency of the drug preserved his sedateness through all this, and he remained motionless in sleep, folded in the centre of calm and satisfaction, while this tumult was raging and the City shook with uproar. But the people, when they saw him whitened behind a lather, wrath at Baba Mustapha's polluting touch and the audacity of barbercraft wrestled in them with the outpouring of reverence for Shagpat, and a clamour arose for the instant sacrifice of Baba Mustapha at the foot of their idol Shagpat. And the whole of the City of Shagpat, men, women, and children, and the sheikhs and the dervishes and crafts of the City besieged the King's palace in that middle hour of the noon, clamouring for the sacrifice of Baba Mustapha at the feet of their idol Shagpat.

THE BURNING OF THE IDENTICAL

Now, the Great Hall for the dispensing of justice in the palace of the King was one on which the architect and the artificers had lavished all their arts and subtleties of design and taste and their conceptions of uniformity and grandeur, so that none entered it without a sense of abasement, and the soul acknowledged awfulness and power in him that ruled and sat eminent on the throne of that Hall. For, lo! the throne was of solid weighty gold, overhung with rich silks

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and purples; and the hall was lofty, with massive pillars, fifty on either side, ranging in stateliness down toward the blaze of the throne; and the pillars were pillars of porphyry and of jasper and precious marble, carved over all of them with sentences of the cunningest wisdom, distichs of excellence, odes of the poet, stanzas sharp with the incisiveness of wit, and that solve knotty points with but one stroke; and these pillars were each the gift of a mighty potentate of earth or of a Genie.

In the centre of the Hall a fountain set up a glittering jet, and spread abroad the breath of freshness, leaping a height of sixty feet, and shimmering there in a wide bright canopy with dropping silver sides. It was rumoured of the waters of this fountain that they were fed underground from the waters of the Sacred River, brought there in the reign of El Rasoon, a former sovereign in the City of Shagpat, by the labours of Zak,—a Genie subject to the magic of Azrooka, the Queen of El Rasoon; but, of a surety, none of earth were like to them in silveriness and sweet coolingness, and they were as wine to the weary.

Now, the King sat on his throne in the Hall, and around him his ministers, and Emirs, and chamberlains, and officers of state, and black slaves, and the soldiers of his guard armed with naked scimitars. And the King was as a sun in splendour, severely grave, and a frown on his forehead to darken kingdoms, for the attempt on Shagpat had stirred his kingly wrath, and awakened zeal for the punishment of all conspirators and offenders. So when Shagpat was borne in to the King upon his throne of cushions where he sat upright, smiling and inanimate, the King commanded that he should be placed at his side, the place of honour; and Shagpat was as a moon behind the whiteness of the lathers; even as we behold moon and sun together in the heavens, was Shagpat by the King.

There was great hubbub in the Hall at the entrance of Shagpat, and a hum of rage and muttered vehemence passed among the assembled people that filled the hall like a cavern of the sea, the sea roaring outside; but presently the King spake, and all hushed. Then said he, 'O people! thought I to see a day that would shame Shagpat? he that has brought honour and renown upon me and all of this city, so that we shine a constellation and place of pilgrimage to men in remote islands and corners of the earth? Yea! and to Afrites and Genii? Have I not castigated barbers, and brought barbercraft to degradation, so that no youth is taught to exercise it? And through me the tackle of the barber, is't not a rusty and abominated weapon, and as a sword thrown by and broken, for that it dishonoured us? Surely, too, I have esteemed Shagpat precious.'

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While he spake, the King gazed on Shagpat, and was checked by passion at beholding him under the lather, so that the people praised Shagpat and the King. Then said he, 'O people, who shall forecast disasters and triumphs? Lo, I had this day at dawn intelligence from recreant Oolb, and its King and Court, and of their return to do honour to Shagpat! And I had this day at dawn tidings, O people, from Shiraz, and of the adhesion of that vain city and its provinces to the might of Shagpat! So commenced the day, yet is he, the object of the world's homage, within a few hours defiled by a lather and the hand of an impious one!'

At these words of the King there rose a shout of vindictiveness and fury; but he cried, 'Punishment on the offenders in season, O people! Probably we have not abased ourselves for the honour that has befallen us in Shagpat, and the distinction among nations and tribes and races, and creeds and sects, that we enjoy because of Shagpat. Behold! in abasement voluntarily undertaken there is exceeding brightness and exaltation; for how is the sun a sun save that daily he dippeth in darkness, to rise again freshly majestic? So then, be mine the example, O people of the City of Shagpat!'

Thereupon lo, the King descended from his throne, and stripped to the loins, flinging away his glittering crown and his robes, and abased himself to the dust with loud cries and importunities and howls, and penitential ejaculations and sobbings; and it was in that Hall as when the sun goeth down in storm. Likewise the ministers of the King, and the Viziers and Emirs and officers of state, and slaves, and soldiers of the guard, bared their limbs, and fell beside the King with violent outcries and wailings; and the whole of the people in the Hall prostrated their bodies with wailings and lamentations. And Baba Mustapha feigned to bewail himself, and Noorna bin Noorka knelt beside Kadza, and shrieked loudest, striking her breast and scattering her hair; and that Hall was as a pit full of serpents writhing, and of tigers and lions and wild beasts howling, each pitching his howl a note above his neighbours, so that the tone rose and sank, and there was no one soul erect in that Hall save Shagpat, he on his throne of cushions smiling behind the lathers, inanimate, serene as they that sin not. After an hour's lapse there came a pause, and the people hearkened for the voice of the King; but in the intervals a louder moan would strike their ears, and they whispered among themselves, 'Tis that of the fakir, El Zoop!' and the moaning and howling prevailed again. And again they heard another moan, a deep one, as of the earth in its throes, and said among themselves, 'Tis that of Bootlbac, the drumbeater!' and this led off to the howl of Areep, the dervish; and this was followed by the shriek of Zeel, the garlic-seller; and the waul of Krooz el Krazawik, the carrier; and the complainings of Dob, the confectioner; and the

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groan of Sallap, the broker; and the yell of Azawool, the builder. There would have been no end to it known; but the King rose and commenced plucking his beard and his hair,—they likewise in silence. When he had performed this ceremony a space, the King called, and a basin of water was brought to him, and handed round by slaves, and all dipped in it their hands, and renewed their countenances and re-arranged their limbs; and the Hall brightened with the eye of the King, and he cried, 'O people, lo, the plot is revealed to me, and 'tis a deep one; but, by this beard, we'll strike at the root of it, and a blow of deadliness. Surely we have humiliated ourselves, and vengeance is ours! How say ye?'

A noise like the first sullen growl of a vexed wild beast which telleth that fury is fast travelling and the teeth will flash, followed these words; and the King called to his soldiers of the guard, 'Ho! forth with this wretch that dared defile Shagpat, the holy one! and on your heads be it to fetch hither Feshnavat, the son of Feil, that was my Vizier, he that was envious of Shagpat, and whom we spared in our clemency.'

Some of the guard went from the Hall to fulfil the King's injunction on Feshnavat, others thrust forth Baba Mustapha in the eyes of the King. Baba Mustapha was quaking as a frog quaketh for water, and he trembled and was a tongueless creature deserted of his lower limbs, and with eyeballs goggling, through exceeding terror. Now, when the King saw him, he contracted his brows as one that peereth on a small and minute object, crying, 'How! is't such as he, this monster of audaciousness and horrible presumption? Truly 'tis said:

"For ruin and the deeds preluding change,
Fear not great Beasts, nor Eagles when they range:
But dread the crawling worm or pismire mean,
Satan selects them, for they are unseen."

And this wretch is even of that sort, the select of Satan! Off with the top of the reptile, and away with him!

Now, at the issue of the mandate Baba Mustapha choked, and horror blocked the throat of confession in him, so that he did nought save stagger imploringly; but the prompting of Noorna sent Kadza to the foot of the throne, and Kadza bent her body and exclaimed, 'O King of the age! 'tis Kadza, the espoused of Shagpat thy servant, that speaketh; and lo! a wise woman has said in my ear, "How if this emissary and instrument of the Evil One, this barber, this filthy fellow, be made to essay on Shagpat before the people his science and his malice? for 'tis certain that Shagpat is surrounded where he sitteth by Genii invisible, defended by them, and no harm can hap to him, but an illumination of glory and triumph manifest": and for this barber, his punishment can afterwards be looked to, O great King!'

The King mused awhile and sank in his beard. Then said he to them that had hold of Baba Mustapha watching for the signal, 'I have thought over it, and the means of bringing double honour on the head of Shagpat. So release this fellow, and put in his hands the tackle taken from him.'

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This was done, and the people applauded the wisdom of the King, and crowded forward with sharpness of expectation; but Baba Mustapha, when he felt in his hands the tackle, the familiar instruments, strength and wit returned to him in petty measures, and he thought, 'Perchance there'll yet be time for my nephew to strike, if he fail me not; fool that I was to look for glory, and not leave the work to him, for this Shagpat is a mighty one, powerful in fleas, and it needeth something other than tackle to combat such as he. A mighty one, said I? by Allah, he's awful in his mightiness!'

So Baba Mustapha kept delaying, and feigned to sharpen the blade, and the King called to him, 'Haste! to the work! is it for thee, vile wretch, to make preparation for the accursed thing in our presence?' And the people murmured and waxed impatient, and the King called again, 'Thou'lt essay this, thou wretch, without a head, let but another minute pass.' So when Baba Mustapha could delay no longer, he sighed heavily and his trembling returned, and the power of Shagpat smote him with an invisible hand, so that he could scarce move; but dread pricked him against dread, and he advanced upon Shagpat to shear him, and assumed the briskness of the barber, and was in the act of bending over him to bring the blade into play, when, behold, one of the chamberlains of the King stood up in the presence and spake a word that troubled him, and the King rose and hurried to a balcony looking forth on the Desert, and on three sides of the Desert three separate clouds of dust were visible, and from these clouds presently emerged horsemen with spears and pennons and plumes; and he could discern the flashing of their helms and the glistening of steel-plates and armour of gold and silver. Seeing this, the colour went from the cheeks of the King and his face became as a pinched pomegranate, and he cried aloud, 'What visitation's this? Awahy! we are beset, and here's abasement brought on us without self-abasing!' Meantime these horsemen detached themselves from the main bodies and advanced at a gallop, wheeling and circling round each other, toward the walls of the city, and when they were close they lowered their arms and made signs of amity, and proclaimed their mission and the name of him they served. So tidings were brought to the King that the Lords of three cities, with vast retinues, were come, by reason of a warning, to pay homage to Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor; and these three cities were the cities of Oolb, and of Gaf, and of Shiraz, even these!

Now, when the King heard of it, he rejoiced with an exceeding joy, and arrayed himself in glory, and mounted a charger, the pride of his stables, and rode out to meet the Lords of the three cities surrounded by the horsemen of his guard. And it was within half-a-mile of the city walls that the four sovereigns met, and dismounted and saluted and embraced, and bestowed on one another kingly flatteries, and the

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titles of Cousin and Brother. So when the unctions of Royalty were over, these three Kings rode back to the city with the King that was their host, and the horsemen of the three kingdoms pitched their tents and camped outside the walls, making cheer. Then the King of the City of Shagpat related to the three Kings the story of Shagpat and the attempt that had been made on him; and in the great Hall of Justice he ordained the erecting of thrones for them whereon to sit; and they, when they had paid homage to Shagpat, sat by him there on either side. Then the King cried, 'This likewise owe we to Shagpat, our glory! See, now, how the might that's in him shall defeat the machinations of evil, O my cousins of Oolb, and of Gaf, and of Shiraz.' Thereupon he called, 'Bring forth the barber!'

So Baba Mustapha was thrust forth by the soldiers of the guard; and the King of Shiraz, who was no other than the great King Shahpushan, exclaimed, when he beheld Baba Mustapha, 'He? why, it is the prince of barbers and talkative ones! Hath he not operated on my head, the head of me in old time? Truly now, if it be in man to shave Shagpat, the hand of this barber will do it!'

And the King of Oolb peered on Baba Mustapha, crying, 'Even this fellow I bastinadoed!'

And the King of Gaf, that was Kresnuk, famous in the annals of the time, said aloud, 'I'm amazed at the pertinacity of this barber! To my court he came, searching some silly nephew, and would have shaved us all in spite of our noses; yea, talked my chief Vizier into a dead sleep, and so thinned him. And there was no safety from him save in thongs and stripes and lashes!'

Now, upon that the King of the City cried, 'Be the will of Allah achieved, and the inviolacy of Shagpat made manifest! Thou barber, thou! do thy worst to contaminate him, and take the punishment in store for thee. And if it is written thou succeed, then keep thy filthy life: small chance of that!'

Baba Mustapha remembered the poet's words:

The abyss is worth a leap, however wide,
When life, sweet life, is on the other side.

And he controlled himself to the mastery of his members, and stepped forward to essay once more the Shaving of Shagpat. Lo, the great Hall was breathless, nought heard save the splashing of the fountain in its fall, and the rustle of the robe of Baba Mustapha as he aired his right arm, hovering round Shagpat like a bird about the nest; and he was buzzing as a bee ere it entereth the flower, and quivered like a butterfly when 'tis fluttering over a blossom; and Baba Mustapha sniffed at Shagpat within arm's reach,

fearing him, so that the people began to hum with a great rapture, and the King Shahpushan cried, 'Aha! mark him! this monkey knoweth the fire!'

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But the King of the City of Shagpat was wroth, and commanded his guards to flourish their scimitars, and the keen light cut the chords of indecision in Baba Mustapha, and drove him upon Shagpat with a dash of desperation; and lo! he stretched his hand and brought down the blade upon the head of Shagpat. Then was the might of Shagpat made manifest, for suddenly in his head the Identical rose up straight, even to a level with the roof of that hall, burning as it had been an angry flame of many fiery colours, and Baba Mustapha was hurled from him a great space like a ball that reboundeth, and he was twisting after the fashion of envenomed serpents, sprawling and spurning, and uttering cries of horror. Surely, to see that sight the four Kings and the people bit their forefingers, and winked till the water stood in their eyes, and Kadza, turning about, exclaimed, 'This owe we to the wise woman! where lurketh she?' So she called about the hall, 'wise woman! wise woman!'

Now, when she could find Noorna bin Noorka nowhere in that crowd, she shrieked exultingly, "Twas a Genie! Wullahy! all Afrites, male and female, are in the service of Shagpat, my light, my eyes, my sun! I his moon!'

Meantime the King of the City called to Baba Mustapha, 'Hast thou had enough of barbering, O vile one? Ho! a second essay on the head of Shagpat! so shall the might that's in him be indisputable, bruited abroad, and a great load upon the four winds.'

Now, Baba Mustapha was persuaded by the scimitars of the guard to a second essay on the head of Shagpat, and the second time he was shot away from Shagpat through the crowd and great assemblage to the extreme end of the hall, where he lay writhing about, abandoned in loathliness; and he in his despondency, and despite of protestation and the slackness of his limbs, was pricked again by the scimitars of the guard to a third essay on the head of Shagpat, the people jeering at him, for they were joyous, light of heart; and lo! the third time he was shot off violently, and whirled away like a stone from a sling, even into the outer air and beyond the city walls, into the distance of waste places. And now a great cry rose from the people, as it were a song of triumph, for the Identical stood up wrathfully from the head of Shagpat, burning in brilliance, blinding to look on, he sitting inanimate beneath it; and it waxed in size and pierced through the roof of the hall, and was a sight to the streets of the city; and the horsemen camped without the walls beheld it, and marvelled, and it was as a pillar of fire to the solitudes of the Desert afar, and the wild Arab and wandering Bedouins and caravans of pilgrimage. Distant cities asked the reason of that appearance, and the cunning fakir interpreted it, and the fervent dervish expounded from it, and messengers flew from gate to gate and from land to land in exultation, and barbers hid their heads, and were friendly with the fox in his earth, because of

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that light. So the Identical burned on the head of Shagpat as in wrath, and with exceeding splendour of attraction, three nights and three days; and the fishes of the sea shoaled to the sea's surface and stared at it, and the fowls of the air congregated about the fury of the light with screams and mad flutters, till the streets and mosques and minarets and bright domes and roofs and cupolas of the City of Shagpat were blackened with scorched feathers of the vulture and the eagle and the rook and the raven and the hawk, and other birds, sacred and obscene; so was the triumph of Shagpat made manifest to men and the end of the world by the burning of the Identical three days and three nights.

THE FLASHES OF THE BLADE

Now, it was the morning of the fourth day, and lo! at the first leap of the sun of that day the flame of the Identical abated in its fierceness, and it dwindled and darkened, and tapered and flickered feebly, descending from its altitude in the heavens and through the ceiling of the Hall, and lay down to sleep among the intricate lengths and frizzled convolutions and undulating weights flowing from Shagpat, an undistinguished hair, even as the common hairs of his head. So, upon that, the four fasting Kings breathed, and from the people of the City there went up a mighty shout of gladness and congratulation at the glory they had witnessed; and they took the air deeply into their chests, and were as divers that have been long fathoms-deep under water, and ascend and puff hard and press the water from their eyes, that yet refuse to acknowledge with a recognition the things that be and the sights above, so mazed are they with those unmentionable marvels and treasures and profusion of jewels, and splendid lazy growths and lavish filmy illuminations, and multitudinous pearls and sheering shells, that lie heaped in the beds of the ocean. As the poet has said:

After too strong a beam,
Too bright a glory,
We ask, Is this a dream
Or magic story?

And he says:

When I've had rapturous visions such as make
The sun turn pale, and suddenly awake,
Long must I pull at memory in this beard,
Ere I remember men and things revered.

So was it with the people of the City, and they stood in the Hall and winked staringly at one another, shouting and dancing at intervals, capering with mad gravity, exclaiming on

the greatness of that they had witnessed. And Zeel the garlic-seller fell upon Mob the confectioner, and cried, 'Was this so, O Dob? Wullahy! this glory, was it verily?' And Dob peered dimly upon Zeel, whispering solemnly, 'Say, now, art thou of a surety that Zeel the garlic-seller known to me, my boon-fellow?' And the twain turned to Sallap the broker, and exchanged interjections with him, and with Azawool the builder, and with Krooz el Krazawik the carrier; and they accosted Bootbac

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the drum-beater, where he stood apart, drumming the air as to a march of triumph, and no word would he utter, neither to Zeel, nor to Sallap, nor to Krooz el Krazawik, nor to Azawool his neighbour, nor to any present, but continued drumming on the air rapidly as in answer, increasing in the swiftness of his drumming till it was a rage to mark him, and the excitement about Bootlbac became as a mad eddy in the midst of a mighty stream, he drumming the air with exceeding swiftness to various measures, beating before him as on the tightened skin, lost to all presences save the Identical and Shagpat. So they edged away from Bootlbac in awe, saying, 'He's inspired, Bootlbac! 'tis the triumph of Shagpat he drummeth.' They feigned to listen to him till their ears deceived them, and they rejoiced in the velocity of the soundless tune of Bootlbac the drum-beater, and were stirred by it, excited to a forgetfulness of their fasting. Such was the force of the inspiration of Bootlbac the drum-beater, caused by the burning of the Identical.

Now, the four Kings, when they had mastered their wits, gazed in silence on Shagpat, and sighed and shook their heads, and were as they that have swallowed a potent draught and ponder sagely over the gulp. Surely, the visages of the Kings of Shiraz and of Gaf and of Oolb betokened dread of Shagpat and amazement at him; but the King of the City exulted, and the shining of content was on his countenance, and he cried, 'Wondrous!' and again, 'Wullahy, wondrous!' and 'Oh, glory!' And he laughed and clucked and chuckled, and the triumph of Shagpat was to him as a new jewel in his crown outshining all others, and he was for awhile as the cock smitten with the pride of his comb, the peacock magnified by admiration of his tail. Then he cried, 'For this, praise we Allah and the Prophet. Wullahy, 'twas wondrous!' and he went off again into a roll of cluckings and chucklings and exclamations of delight, crying, 'Need they further proof of the power in Shagpat now? Has he not manifested it? So true is that saying—

"The friend that flattereth weakeneth at length;
It is the foe that calleth forth our strength."

Wondrous! and never knew earth a thing to equal it in the range of marvels!

Now, ere the last word was spoken by the King, there passed through the sky a mighty flash. Those in the Hall saw it, and the horsemen of the three cities encamped without the walls were nigh blinded by the keenness of its blaze. So they looked into the height, and saw straight over the City a speck of cloud, but no thunder came from it; and the King cried, 'These be Genii! the issue of this miracle is yet to come! look for it, and exult.' Then he turned to the other Kings, but they were leaning to right and left in their seats, as do the intoxicated, without strength to answer his questioning. So he exclaimed, 'A curse on my head! have I forgotten the laws of hospitality? my cousins are famished!'

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He was giving orders for the spreading of a sumptuous banquet when there passed through the sky another mighty flash. They awaited the thunder this time confidently, yet none came. Suddenly the King exclaimed, 'Tis the wrath of Shagpat that his assailants remain uncastigated!' Then cried he to the eunuchs of the guard, 'Hither with Feshnavat, the son of Feil!' And the King said to Feshnavat, 'Thou plotter! envious of Shagpat!' Here the King, Kresnuk, fell forward at the feet of Shagpat from sheer inanition, and the King of the City ordered instantly wines and viands to be brought into the Hall, and commenced saying to Feshnavat, in the words of the wise entablature:

"Of reckless mercy thus the Sage declared:
More culpable the sparer than the spared;
For he that breaks one law, breaks one alone:
But who thwarts Justice flouts Law's sovereign throne."

And have I not been over-merciful in thy case?

As the King was haranguing Feshnavat, his nostril took in the steam of the viands and the fresh odours of the wines, and he could delay no longer to satisfy his craving, but caught up the goblet, and drank from it till his visage streamed the tears of contentment. Lo, while he put forth his hand tremblingly, as to continue the words of his condemnation of the Vizier, the heavens were severed by a third flash, one exceeding in fierceness the other flashes; and now the Great Hall rocked, and the pillars and thrones trembled, and the eyes of Shagpat opened. He made no motion, but sat like a wonder of stone, looking before him. Surely, Kadza shrieked, and rushed forward to him from the crowd, yet he said nothing, and was as one frozen. So the King cried, 'He waketh! the flashes preceded his wakening! Now shall he see the vengeance of kings on his enemies.' Thereupon he made a signal, and the scimitars of the guard were in air over the head of Feshnavat, when darkness as of the dropping of night fell upon all, and the darkness spake, saying, 'I am Abarak of the Bar, preceptor of the Event!'

Then it was light, but the ears of every soul present were pierced with the wailing of wild animals, and on all sides from the Desert hundreds of them were seen making toward the City, some swiftly, others at a heavy pace; and when they were come near they crouched and fawned, and dropped their dry tongues as in awe. There was the serpent, meek as before the days of sin, and the leopard slinking to get among the legs of men, and the lion came trundling along in utter flabbiness, raising not his head. Soon the streets were thronged with elephants and lions and sullen tigers, and wild cats and wolves, not a tail erect among them: great was the marvel! So the King cried, 'We 're in the thick of wonders; banquet we lightly while they increase upon us! What's yonder little man?' This was Abarak that stood before the King, and exclaimed, 'I am the darkness that announceth the mastery of the

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Event, as a shadow before the sun's approach, and it is the Shaving of Shagpat!' The world darkened before the eyes of the King when he heard this, and in a moment Abarak was clutched by the soldiers of the guard, and dragged beside Feshnavat to await the final blow; and this would have parted two heads from two bodies at one stroke, but now Noorna bin Noorka entered the hall, veiled and in the bright garb of a bride, with veiled attendants about her, and the people opened to give her passage to the throne of the King. So she said, 'Delay the stroke yet awhile, O Head of the Magnanimous! I am she claimed by Shagpat; surely, I am bride of him that is Master of the Event, and the hour of bridals is the hour of clemency.'

The King looked at Shagpat, perplexed; but the eye of Shagpat gazed as into the distance of another world. Then said he, 'We shall hear nought from the mouth of Shagpat till he is avenged, and till then he is silent with exceeding wrath.' Hearing this, Noorna ran quickly to a window of the Hall, and let loose a white dove from her bosom.

Then came there that flash which is recorded in old traditions as the fourth of the flashes of thunderless lightnings, after the passing of which, hundreds of fakirs that had been awaiting it saw nothing further on this earth. Down through the Hall it swept; and lo! when the Kings and the people recovered their sight to regard Shagpat, he was, one side of him, clean shorn, the shaven side shining as the very moon!

Surely from that moment there was no longer aught mortal in the combat that ensued. For now, while amazement and horror palsied all present, the Genie Karaz, uttering a howl of fury, shot down the length of the Hall like a black storm-bolt, and caught up Shagpat, and whirled off with him into the air; and they beheld him dive and dodge the lightnings that beset him from upper heaven, catching Shagpat from them, now by the heels, now by the hair remaining one side his head. This lasted a full hour, when the Genie paused a second, and made a sheer descent into the earth. Then saw they the wings of Koorookh, each a league in length, overshadow the entire land, and on the neck of the bird sat Shibli Bagarag cleaving through the earth with his blade, and he sat on Koorookh as the moon sits on the midnight. There was no light save the light shed abroad by the flashes of the blade, and in these they beheld the air suffocated with Afrites and Genii in a red and brown and white heat, followers of Karaz. Strokes of the blade clove them, and their blood was fire that flowed over the feathers of Koorookh, lighting him in a conflagration; but the bird flew constantly to a fountain of earth below and extinguished it. Then the battle recommenced, and the solid earth yawned at the gashes made by the mighty blade, and its depths revealed how Karaz was flying with Shagpat from circle to circle of the under-regions, hurrying with him downward to the lowest circle, that was flaming to points, like the hair of vast heads. Presently they saw a wondrous quivering flash divide the Genie, and his heels and head fell together in the abysses, leaving Shagpat prone on great brasiers of penal flame. Then the blade made

another hissing sweep over Shagpat, leaving little of the wondrous growths on him save a topknot.

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But now was the hour struck when Rabesqurat could be held no longer serving the ferry in Aklis; and the terrible Queen streamed in the sky, like a red disastrous comet, and dived, eagle-like, into the depths, re-ascending with Shagpat in her arms, cherishing him; and lo, there were suddenly a thousand Shagpats multiplied about, and the hand of Shibli Bagarag became exhausted with hewing at them. The scornful laugh of the Queen was heard throughout earth as she triumphed over Shibli Bagarag with hundreds of Shagpats, Illusions; and he knew not where to strike at the Shagpat, and was losing all sleight of hand, dexterity, and cunning. Noorna shrieked, thinking him lost; but Abarak seized his bar, and leaning it in the direction of Aklis, blew a pellet from it that struck on the eye of Aklis, and this sent out a stretching finger of beams, and singled forth very Shagpat from the myriads of semblances, so that he glowed and was ruddy, the rest cowering pale, and dissolving like salt-grains in water.

Then saw earth and its inhabitants how the Genie Karaz re-ascended in the shape of a vulture with a fire beak, pecking at the eyes of him that wielded the Sword, so that he was bewildered and shook this way and that over the neck of Koorookh, striking wildly, languidly cleaving towers and palaces, and monuments of earth underneath him. Now, Shibli Bagarag discerned his danger, and considered, 'The power of the Sword is to sever brains and thoughts. Great is Allah! I'll seek my advantage in that.'

So he whirled Koorookh thrice in the crimson smoke of the atmosphere, and put the blade between the first and second thought in the head of Rabesqurat, whereby the sense of the combat became immediately confused in her mind, and she used her powers as the fool does, equally against all, for the sake of mischief solely—no longer mistress of her own Illusions; and she began doubling and trebling Shibli Bagarag on the neck of monstrous birds, speeding in draggled flightiness from one point of the sky to another. Even in the terror of the combat, Shibli Bagarag was fair to burst into a fit of violent laughter at the sight of the Queen wagging her neck loosely, perking it like a mad raven; and he took heart, and swept the blade rapidly over Shagpat as she dandled him, leaving Shagpat but one hair remaining on him; yet was that the Identical; and it arose, and was a serpent in his head, and from its jaws issued a river of fiery serpents: these and a host of Afrites besieged Shibli Bagarag; and now, to defend himself, he unloosed the twin Genii, Karavejis and Veejravoosh, from the wrist of that hand which wielded the Sword of Aklis, and these alternately interwound before and about him, and were even as a glittering armour of emerald plates, warding from him the assaults of the host; and lo! he flew, and the battle followed him over blazing cities and lands on fire with the slanting hail of sparkles.

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By this time every soul in the City of Shagpat, kings and people, all save Abarak and Noorna bin Noorka, were overcome and prostrate with their faces to the ground; but Noorna watched the conflict eagerly, and saw the head of Shagpat sprouting incessant fresh crops of hair, despite the pertinacious shearing of her betrothed. Then she smote her hands, and cried, 'Yea! though I lose my beauty and the love of my betrothed, I must join in this, or he'll be lost.' So, saying to Abarak, 'Watch over me,' she went into the air, and, as she passed Rabesqurat, was multiplied into twenty damsels of loveliness. Then Abarak beheld a scorpion following the twenty in mid-air, and darting stings among them. Noorna tossed a ring, and it fell in a circle of flame round the scorpion. So, while the scorpion was shooting in squares to escape from the circle, the fire-beaked vulture flew to it, and fluttered a dense rain which swallowed the flame, and the scorpion and vulture assailed Noorna, that was changed to a golden hawk in the midst of nineteen other golden hawks. Now, as Rabesqurat came scudding by, and saw the encounter, she made the twenty hawks a hundred. The Genie Karaz howled at her, and pinioned her to a pillar below in the Desert, with Shagpat in her arms. But, as he soared aloft to renew the fight with Noorna, Shibli Bagarag loosed to her aid the Slaves of the Sword, and Abarak marked him slope to a distant corner of earth, and reascend in a cloud, which drew swiftly over the land toward the Great Hall. Lo, Shibli Bagarag stepped from it through a casement of the Hall, and with him Shagpat, a slack weight, mated out of all power of motion. Koorookh swooped low, on his back Baba Mustapha, and Shibli Bagarag flung Abarak beside him on the bird. Then Koorookh whirled off with them; and while the heavens raged, Shibli Bagarag prepared a rapid lather, and dashed it over Shagpat, and commenced shearing him with lightning sweeps of the blade. 'Twas as a racing wheel of fire to see him! Suddenly he desisted, and wiped the sweat from his face. Then calling on the name of Allah, he gave a last keen cunning sweep with the blade, and following that, the earth awfully quaked and groaned, as if speaking in the abysmal tongue the Mastery of the Event to all men. Aklis was revealed in burning beams as of a sun, and the trouble of the air ceased, vapours slowly curling to the four quarters. Shibli Bagarag had smitten clean through the Identical! Terribly had Noorna and those that aided her been oppressed by the multitude of their enemies; but, in a moment these melted away, and Karaz, together with the scorpion that was Goorelka, vanished. Day was on the baldness of Shagpat.

CONCLUSION

So was shaved Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor, the son of Shoolpi, the son of Shullum, by Shibli Bagarag, of Shiraz, according to preordainment.

The chronicles relate, that no sooner had he mastered the Event, than men on the instant perceived what illusion had beguiled them, and, in the words of the poet,—

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The blush with which their folly they confess
Is the first prize of his supreme success.

Even Bootlbac, the drum-beater, drummed in homage to him, and the four Kings were they that were loudest in their revilings of the spouse of Kadza, and most obsequious in praises of the Master. The King of the City was fain to propitiate his people by a voluntary resignation of his throne to Shibli Bagarag, and that King took well to heart the wisdom of the sage, when he says:

Power, on Illusion based, o'ertoppeth all;
The more disastrous is its certain fall!

Surely Shibli Bagarag returned the Sword to the Sons of Aklis, flashing it in midnight air, and they, with the others, did reverence to his achievement. They were now released from the toil of sharpening the Sword a half-cycle of years, to wander in delight on the fair surface of the flowery earth, breathing its roses, wooing its brides; for the mastery of an Event lasteth among men the space of one cycle of years, and after that a fresh Illusion springeth to befool mankind, and the Seven must expend the concluding half-cycle in preparing the edge of the Sword for a new mastery. As the poet declareth in his scorn:

Some doubt Eternity: from life begun,
Has folly ceased within them, sire to son?
So, ever fresh Illusions will arise
And lord creation, until men are wise.

And he adds:

That is a distant period; so prepare
To fight the false, O youths, and never spare!
For who would live in chronicles renowned
Must combat folly, or as fool be crowned.

Now, for the Kings of Shiraz and of Gaf, Shibli Bagarag entertained them in honour; but the King of Oolb he disgraced and stripped of his robes, to invest Baba Mustapha in those royal emblems—a punishment to the treachery of the King of Oolb, as is said by Abou Eznol:

When nations with opposing forces, rash,
Shatter each other, thou that wouldst have stood
Apart to profit by the monstrous feud,
Thou art the surest victim of the crash.



Take colours of whichever side thou wilt,
And stedfastly thyself in battle range;
Yet, having taken, shouldst thou dare to change,
Suspicion hunts thee as a thing of guilt.

Baba Mustapha, was pronounced Sovereign of Oolb, amid the acclamations of the guard encamped under the command of Ravaloke, without the walls.

No less did Shibli Bagarag honour the benefactor of Noorna, making him chief of his armies; and he, with his own hand, bestowed on the good old warrior the dress of honour presented to him by the Seven Sons, charactered with all the mysteries of Aklis, a marvel lost to men in the failure to master the Illusion now dominating earth.

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So, then, of all that had worshipped Shagpat, only Kadza clung to him, and she departed with him into the realms of Rabesqurat, who reigned there, divided against herself by the stroke of the Sword. The Queen is no longer mighty, for the widening of her power has weakened it, she being now the mistress of the single-thoughted, and them that follow one idea to the exclusion of a second. The failure in the unveiling of her last-cherished Illusion was in the succumbing frailty of him that undertook the task, the world and its wise men having come to the belief that in thwackings there was ignominy to the soul of man, and a tarnish on the lustre of heroes. On that score, hear the words of the poet, a vain protest:

Ye that nourish hopes of fame!
Ye who would be known in song!
Ponder old history, and duly frame
Your souls to meek acceptance of the thong.

Lo! of hundreds who aspire,
Eighties perish-nineties tire!
They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,
Were season 'd by celestial hail of thwacks.

Fortune in this mortal race
Builds on thwackings for its base;
Thus the All-Wise doth make a flail a staff,
And separates his heavenly corn from chaff.

Think ye, had he never known
Noorna a belabouring crone,
Shibli Bagarag would have shaved Shagpat
The unthwack'd lives in chronicle a rat!

'Tis the thwacking in this den
Maketh lions of true men!
So are we nerved to break the clinging mesh
Which tames the noblest efforts of poor flesh.

Feshnavat became the Master's Vizier, and Abarak remained at the right hand of Shibli Bagarag, his slave in great adventure. No other condition than bondage gave peace to Abarak. He was of the class enumerated by the sage:

Who, with the strength of giants, are but tools,
The weighty hands which serve selected fools.

Now, this was how it was in the case of Baba Mustapha, and the four Kings, and Feshnavat, and Abarak, and Ravaloke, and Kadza, together with Shagpat; but, in the

case of Noorna bin Noorka, surely she was withering from a sting of the scorpion shot against her bosom, but the Seven Sons of Aklis gave her a pass into Aklis on the wings of Koorookh, and Gulrevaz, the daughter of Aklis, tended her, she that was alone capable of restoring her, and counteracting the malice of the scorpion by the hand of purity. So Noorna, prospered; but Shibli Bagarag drooped in uncertainty of her state, and was as a reaper in a field of harvest, around whom lie the yellow sheaves, and the brown beam of autumn on his head, the blaze of plenty; yet is he joyless and stands musing, for one is away who should be there, and without whom the goblet of Success giveth an unsweetened draught, and there is nothing pleasant in life, and the flower on the summit of achievement is blighted. At last, as he was listlessly dispensing justice in the Great Hall, seven days after the mastery of the Event, lo, Noorna, in air, borne by Gulrevaz, she fair and fresh in the revival of health and beauty, and the light of constant love. Of her entry into the Great Hall, to the embrace of her betrothed, the poet exclaims, picturing her in a rapture:

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Her march is music, and my soul obeys
Each motion, as a lute to cunning fingers
I see the earth throb for her as she sways
Wave-like in air, and like a great flower lingers
Heavily over all, as loath to leave
What loves her so, and for her loss would grieve.

But oh, what other hand than heaven's can paint
Her eyes, and that black bow from which their lightning
Pierces afar! long lustrous eyes, that faint
In languor, or with stormy passion brightening:
Within them world in world lights up from sleep,
And gives a glimpse of the eternal deep.

Sigh round her, odorous winds; and, envious rose,
So vainly envious, with such blushes gifted,
Bow to her; die, strangled with jealous throes,
O Bulbul! when she sings with brow uplifted;
Gather her, happy youth, and for thy gain
Thank Him who could such loveliness ordain.

Surely the Master of the Event advanced to her in the glory of a Sultan, and seated her beside him in majesty, and their contract of marriage was read aloud in the Hall, and witnessed, and sealed: joyful was he! Then commenced that festival which lasted forty days, and is termed the Festival of the honours of hospitality to the Sons of Aldis, wherein the head-cook of the palace, Uruish, performed wonders in his science, and menaced the renown of Zrmack, the head-cook of King Shamsheeren. Even so the confectioner, Dob, excelled himself in devices and inventions, and his genius urged him to depict in sugars and pastes the entire adventures of Shibli Bagarag in search of the Sword. Honour we Uruish and Do-b! as the poet sayeth:

Divide not this fraternal twain;
One are they, and one should for ever remain:
As to sweet close in fine music we look,
So the Confectioner follows the Cook.

And one of the Sons of Aklis, Zaragal, beholding this masterpiece of Dob, which was served to the guests in the Great Hall on the fortieth evening, was fair to exclaim in extemporaneous verse:

Have I been wafted to a rise
Of banquet spread in Paradise,
Dower'd with consuming powers divine;—
That I, who have not fail'd to dine,

And greatly,
Fall thus upon the cater and wine
Sedately?

So there was feasting in the Hall, and in the City, and over Earth; great pledging the Sovereign of Barbers, who had mastered an Event, and become the benefactor of his craft and of his kind. 'Tis certain the race of the Bagarags endured for many centuries, and his seed were the rulers of men, and the seal of their empire stamped on mighty wax the Tackle of Barbers.

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Now, of the promise made by the Sons of Aklis to visit Shibli Bagarag before their compulsory return to the labour of the Sword, and recount to him the marvel of their antecedent adventures; and of the love and grief nourished in the souls of men by the beauty and sorrowful eyes of Gulrevaz, that was mined the Bleeding Lily, and of her engagement to tell her story, on condition of receiving the first-born of Noorna to nurse for a season in Aklis; and of Shibli Bagarag's restoration of towns and monuments destroyed by his battle with Karaz; and of the constancy of passion of Shibli Bagarag for Noorna, and his esteem for her sweetness, and his reverence for her wisdom; and of the glory of his reign, and of the Songs and Sentences of Noorna, and of his Laws for the protection and upholding of women, in honour of Noorna, concerning which the Sage has said:

Were men once clad in them, we should create
A race not following, but commanding, fate:

—of all these records, and of the reign of Baba Mustapha in Oolb, surely the chronicles give them in fulness; and they that have searched say of them, there is matter therein for the amusement of generations.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A woman's at the core of every plot man plotteth
Every failure is a step advanced
Failures oft are but advising friends
Like an ill-reared fruit, first at the core it rotteth
More culpable the sparer than the spared
Persist, if thou wouldst truly reach thine ends
Too often hangs the house on one loose stone