

The Son of a Robber

By Lafcadio Hearn

. . . A bud from the Rose-garden of the Guliston, planted in the six hundred and filly-sixth year of the Hejira by the Magician of Speech, the Sheikh Moslih-Eddin Sadi of Shiraz, and arranged after eight divisions corresponding with the Eight Gates of Paradise. . . in the reign of the King of Kings, Abou-Bequer ben Sad, the Most Magnificent, Viceregent of Solomon, Shadow of the host High God upon Earth. . . In the Name of God the Most Merciful.

In those days there were robbers who dwelt in the mountain regions of the land, having fortresses above the eagle's nests, so that no army might successfully assail them. Their name weighed as a terror upon the land, and they closed up the ways of the caravans, and wasted the valleys, and overcame even the king's troops by their strength and their fierceness,—all being mountain-born and worshippers of devouring fire. So the governors of the mountain provinces held council together, and devised conning plans by which to allure the robbers from their inaccessible mountain dwelling, so as to destroy them utterly.

Therefore it came to pass that while the robbers were pursuing after a caravan, the bravest troops of the king concealed themselves in the defiles of the mountain, and there in silence awaited the return of the band with many rich spoils and captives of price for ransom. And when the robbers returned at night, hard pressed by that greatest enemy of the wary, whose name is Sleep, the Persian soldiers set upon them, and smote them, and bound their arms behind their backs, and drave them as a herd of wild sheep into the city. So they were brought into the presence of the king.

And the king commended the wisdom of the governors of the provinces, saying: "Had ye not thus prevailed against them by craft, the strength of the robbers might have waxed with each day of immunity, until it would have been beyond our power to destroy them. The spring may be closed at its mouth with a small covering; but when it shall have been swollen to a river by long flowing, a man may not cross its current even upon the back of an elephant. . . . Let each and all of these prisoners be forthwith put to death as robbers are put to death under our law."

But among these robbers there was a youth slender and shapely as a young palm; and the fruit of his adolescence was yet unripe, the verdure of the rose-garden of his cheeks had scarcely begun to bud. And by reason of the beauty of the boy, a kindly vizier bowed his white beard before the steps of the throne, and kissed the footstool of the king, and prayed him with words of intercession: "Hear the prayer of a slave, O Master of the World, Axis of the Circle of Time, Shadow upon Earth of the Most High God! . . . This child hath never eaten of the fruit of life, never hath he enjoyed the loveliness of the flower of youth. . . . O Master of Kings, thy slave hopes that in thy universal generosity and boundless bounty, thou wilt impose upon thy slave a fresh obligation of gratitude, by sparing the life of this child." . . .

Kindly was the king's heart, but his mind was keen also and clear as edge of diamond; and he knitted his brows because the discourse seemed to him unwise, and therefore pleased him not: "O vizier, dost thou not know that the influence of the good can make no impression upon the hearts of those whose origin is evil? Hast thou not heard it said that the willow giveth no fruit, however fertilizing the rain of heaven? Shall we extinguish a fire, and leave charcoal embers

alight? shall we destroy only the adult viper, and spare her young? It is better that these people be utterly destroyed, root and branch, race and name.” . . .

But the aged vizier, bowing respectfully, again prayed the king, justly commending the wisdom of his words, but seeking exceptions and parables from the sayings of the wise and the traditions of the prophets: “The words of the Successor of Solomon are wisdom supreme to thy slave; and were this boy indeed raised up by the wicked, he would surely become as they. Yet thy slave believes that were he educated only by the best of men, he might become most virtuous. Nor would thy slave spare aught requisite to adorn the boy’s heart and to make blossom the garden of his mind. . . . The prophetic tradition saith: *There is no child born of woman that is not naturally born into Islam, though his father and mother might afterward make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Gheber.* . . . And even the dog Kitmir, that followed and guarded the Seven Holy Sleepers of Mecca, was able to enter Paradise by seizing with his teeth the hem of their blessed robes.” . . .

Then many other ministers and rulers of provinces, unwisely bewitched by the beauty of the boy, united themselves with the vizier in potent intercession. The king’s face moved not, and the shadow remained upon it; but he answered: “I pardon the boy by reason of the weakness of your hearts, yet I perceive no advantage therein. O vizier, bear in mind that the beneficent rains of heaven give radiance to the splendors of the tulip and strength to the venom of serpent-plants. Remember well that the vilest enemy may not be despised, and that the stream now too shallow for the fish may so swell as to carry away the camel with his burthen.” . . .

But the vizier, weeping with joy, took the boy home, and clothed him and fed him, and brought him up as his own sons and as the sons of princes. Masters he procured for him, to make him learned in the knowledge of tongues and of graces and of military accomplishments,—in the arts of archery and sword-play and horsemanship, in singing and in the musical measurement of speech, in courtesy and truth, above all things, and those high qualities desirable in the service of the King of Kings upon earth. So strong and beautiful he grew up that the gaze of all eyes followed whithersoever he moved, even as the waves all turn their heads to look upon the moon; and all, save only the king, smiled upon him. But the king only frowned when he stood before him, and paid no heed to the compliments uttered concerning the young man. One day, the vizier, in the pride of his happiness, said to the king: “Behold! by the work of thy slave, the boy hath been reclaimed from the ways of his fathers; the fountain of his mind hath been opened by wise teachers, and the garden of his heart blossoms with the flowers of virtuous desire.”

But the king only laughed in his beard, and said: “O vizier, the young of the wolf will always be a wolf, even though he be brought up with the children of a man.”

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. . . And when the time of two winters had dimmed the recollection of the king’s words, it came to pass at last that the young man, riding out alone, met with a band of mountain robbers, and felt his heart moved toward them. They, also, knowing his race by the largeness and fierceness of his eyes, and the eagle-curve of his nostrils, and the signs of the wild blood that made lightnings in his veins, were attracted to him, and spake to him in the mountain-tongue of his fathers. And all the fierceness of his fathers returned upon him, with longings for the wind-voices of the peaks, and the madness of leaping water, and the sleeping-places above the clouds where the eagles hatched their young, and the secrets of the unknown caverns, and the altar of flickering fire.

So that he made compact with them; and, treacherously returning, slew the aged vizier together with his sons, and robbed the palace, and fled to the mountains, where he took refuge in his father's ancient fortress, and became a leader of outlaws. And they told the tale to the king.

Then the king, wondering not at all, laughed bitterly and said: "O ye wise fools! how can a good sword be wrought from bad iron? how may education change the hearts of the wicked? Doth not the same rain which nourisheth the rose also nourish the worthless shrubs that grow in salty marshes? How shall a salty waste produce nard? Verily, to do good unto the evil is not less blameworthy than to do evil unto the good."