

The Purple Head

By Richard Garnett

Half ignorant, they turned an easy wheel
That set sharp racks at work to pinch and peel.

I

In the heyday of the Emperor Aurelian's greatness, when his strong right arm propped Rome up, and hewed Palmyra down, when he surrounded his capital with walls fifty miles in circuit, and led Tetricus and Zenobia in triumph through its streets, and distributed elephants among the senators, and laid Etruria out in vineyards, and contemplated in leisure moments the suppression of Christianity as a subordinate detail of administration, a mere ripple on the broad ocean of his policy—at this period Bahram the First, King of Persia, naturally became disquieted in his mind.

“This upstart soldier of fortune,” reflected he, “has an unseemly habit of overcoming and leading captive legitimate princes; thus prejudicing Divine right in the eyes of the vulgar. The skin of his predecessor Valerian, curried and stuffed with straw, hangs to this hour in the temple at Ctesiphon, a pleasing spectacle to the immortal gods. How would my own skin appear in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus? This must not be. I will send an embassy to him, and impress him with my greatness. But how?”

He accordingly convoked his counsellors; the viziers, the warriors, the magi, the philosophers; and addressed them thus:

“The king deigns to consult ye touching a difficult matter. I would flatter the pride of Rome, without lowering the pride of Persia. I would propitiate Aurelian, and at the same time humble him. How shall this be accomplished?”

The viziers, the warriors, and the magi answered not a word. Unbroken silence reigned in the assembly, until the turn came to the sage Marcobad, who, prostrating himself, said, “O king, live for ever! In ancient times, as hath been delivered by our ancestors, Persians were instructed in three accomplishments—to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth. Persia still rides and shoots; truth-speaking (praised be Ormuzd!) she hath discontinued as unbefitting an enlightened nation. Thou needest not, therefore, scruple to circumvent Aurelian. Offer him that which thou knowest will not be found in his treasury, seeing that it is unique in thine own; giving him, at the same time, to understand that it is the ordinary produce of thy dominions. So, while rejoicing at the gift, shall he be abashed at his inferiority. I refer to the purple robe of her majesty the queen, the like of which is not to be found in the whole earth, neither do any know where the dye that tinges it is produced, save that it proceeds from the uttermost parts of India.”

“I approve thy advice,” replied Bahram, “and in return will save thy life by banishing thee from my dominions. When my august consort shall learn that thou hast been the means of depriving her of her robe, she will undoubtedly request that thou mayest be flayed, and thou knowest that I can deny her nothing. I therefore counsel thee to depart with all possible swiftness. Repair to the regions where the purple is produced, and if thou returnest with an adequate supply, I undertake that my royal sceptre shall be graciously extended to thee.”

The philosopher forsook the royal presence with celerity, and his office of chief examiner of court spikenard was bestowed upon another; as also his house and his garden, his gold and silver, his wives and his concubines, his camels and his asses, which were numerous.

While the solitary adventurer wended his way eastward, a gorgeous embassy travelled westward in the direction of Rome.

Arrived in the presence of Aurelian, and at the conclusion of his complimentary harangue, the chief envoy produced a cedar casket, from which he drew a purple robe of such surpassing refulgence, that, in the words of this historian who has recorded the transaction, the purple of the emperor and of the matrons appeared ashy grey in comparison. It was accompanied by a letter thus conceived:

“Bahram to Aurelian: Health! Receive such purple as we have in Persia.”

“Persia, forsooth!” exclaimed Sorianus, a young philosopher versed in natural science, “this purple never was in Persia, except as a rarity. Oh, the mendacity and vanity of these Orientals!”

The ambassador was beginning an angry reply, when Aurelian quelled the dispute with a look, and with some awkwardness delivered himself of a brief oration in acknowledgment of the gift. He took no more notice of the matter until nightfall, when he sent for Sorianus, and inquired where the purple actually was produced.

“In the uttermost parts of India,” returned the philosopher.

“Well,” rejoined Aurelian, summing up the matter with his accustomed rapidity and clearness of head, “either thou or the Persian king has lied to me, it is plain, and, by the favour of the Gods, it is immaterial which, seeing that my ground for going to war with him is equally good in either case. If he has sought to deceive me, I am right in punishing him; if he possesses what I lack, I am justified in taking it away. It would, however, be convenient to know which of these grounds to inscribe in my manifesto; moreover, I am not ready for hostilities at present; having first to extirpate the Blemmyes, Carpi, and other barbarian vermin. I will therefore despatch thee to India to ascertain by personal examination the truth about the purple. Do not return without it, or I shall cut off thy head. My treasury will charge itself with the administration of thy property during thy absence. The robe shall meanwhile be deposited in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. May he have it and thee in his holy keeping!”

Thus, in that age of darkness, were two most eminent philosophers reduced to beggary, and constrained to wander in remote and insalubrious regions; the one for advising a king, the other for instructing an emperor. But the matter did not rest here. For Aurelian, having continued the visible deity of half the world for one hundred and fifty days after the departure of Sorianus, was slain by his own generals. To him succeeded Tacitus, who sank oppressed by the weight of rule; to him Probus, who perished in a military tumult; to him Carus, who was killed by lightning; to him Carinus, who was assassinated by one whom he had wronged; to him Diocletian, who, having maintained himself for twenty years, wisely forebore to tempt Nemesis further, and retired to plant cabbages at Salona. All these sovereigns, differing from each other in every other respect, agreed in a common desire to possess the purple dye, and when the philosopher returned not, successively despatched new emissaries in quest of it. Strange was the diversity of fate which befell these envoys. Some fell into the jaws of lions, some were crushed by monstrous serpents, some trampled by elephants at the command of native princes, some perished of hunger, and some of thirst; some, encountering smooth-browed and dark-tressed girls wreathing their hair with the champak blossom or bathing by moonlight in lotus-mantled tanks, forsook their quest, and led thenceforth idyllic lives in groves of banyan and of palm. Some became enamoured of the principles of the Gymnosophists, some couched themselves for uneasy

slumber upon beds of spikes, weening to wake in the twenty-second heaven. All which romantic variety of fortune was the work of a diminutive insect that crawled or clung heedless of the purple it was weaving into the many-coloured web of human life.

II

Some thirty years after the departure of the Persian embassy to Aurelian, two travellers met at the bottom of a dell in trans-Gangetic India, having descended the hill-brow by opposite paths. It was early morning; the sun had not yet surmounted the timbered and tangled sides of the little valley, so that the bottom still lay steeped in shadow, and glittering with large pearls of limpid dew, while the oval space of sky circumscribed by the summit glowed with the delicate splendour of the purest sapphire. Songs of birds resounded through the brake, and the water lilies which veiled the rivulet trickling through the depths of the retreat were unexpanded still. One of the wayfarers was aged, the other a man of the latest period of middle life. Their raiment was scanty and soiled; their frames and countenances alike bespoke fatigue and hardship; but while the elder one moved with moderate alacrity, the other shuffled painfully along by the help of a staff, shrinking every time that he placed either of his feet on the ground.

They exchanged looks and greetings as they encountered, and the more active of the two, whose face was set in an easterly direction, ventured a compassionate allusion to the other's apparent distress.

"I but suffer from the usual effects of crucifixion," returned the other; and removing his sandals, displayed two wounds, completely penetrating each foot.

The Cross had not yet announced victory to Constantine, and was as yet no passport to respectable society. The first traveller drew back hastily, and regarded his companion with surprise and suspicion.

"I see what is passing in thy mind," resumed the latter, with a smile; "but be under no apprehension. I have not undergone the censure of any judicial tribunal. My crucifixion was merely a painful but necessary incident in my laudable enterprise of obtaining the marvellous purple dye, to which end I was dispatched unto these regions by the Emperor Aurelian."

"The purple dye!" exclaimed the Persian, for it was he. "Thou hast obtained it?"

"I have. It is the product of insects found only in a certain valley eastward from hence, to obtain access to which it is before all things needful to elude the vigilance of seven dragons."

"Thou didst elude them? and afterwards?" inquired Marcobad, with eagerness.

"Afterwards," repeated Sorianus, "I made my way into the valley, where I descried the remains of my immediate predecessor prefixed to a cross."

"Thy predecessor?"

"He who had last made the attempt before me. Upon any one's penetrating the Valley of Purple, as it is termed, with the design I have indicated, the inhabitants, observant of the precepts of their ancestors, append him to a cross by the feet only, confining his arms by ropes at the shoulders, and setting vessels of cooling drink within his grasp. If, overcome with thirst, he partakes of the beverage they leave him to expire at leisure; if he endures for three days, he is permitted to depart with the object of his quest. My predecessor, belonging, as I conjecture, to the Epicurean persuasion, and consequently unable to resist the allurements of sense, had perished in the manner aforesaid. I, a Stoic, refrained and attained."

"Thou didst bear away the tincture? thou hast it now?" impetuously interrogated the Persian.

“Behold it!” replied the Greek, exhibiting a small flask filled with the most gorgeous purple liquid. “What seest thou here?” demanded he triumphantly, holding it up to the light. “To me this vial displays the University of Athens, and throngs of fair youths hearkening to the discourse of one who resembles myself.”

“To my vision,” responded the Persian, peering at the vial, “it rather reveals a palace, and a dress of honour. But suffer me to contemplate it more closely, for my eyes have waxed dim by over application to study.”

So saying, he snatched the flask from Sorianus, and immediately turned to fly. The Greek sprang after his treasure, and failing to grasp Marcobad’s wrist, seized his beard, plucking the hair out by handfuls. The infuriated Persian smote him on the head with the crystal flagon. It burst into shivers, and the priceless contents gushed forth in a torrent over the uncovered head and uplifted visage of Sorianus, bathing every hair and feature with the most vivid purple.

The aghast and thunderstricken philosophers remained gazing at each other for a moment.

“It is indelible!” cried Sorianus, in distraction rushing down, however, to the brink of the little stream, and plunging his head beneath the waters. They carried away a cloud of purple, but left the purple head stained as before.

The philosopher, as he upraised his glowing and dripping countenance from the brook, resembled Silenus emerging from one of the rivers which Bacchus metamorphosed into wine during his campaign in India. He resorted to attrition and contrition, to maceration and laceration; he tried friction with leaves, with grass, with sedge, with his garments; he regarded himself in one crystal pool after another, a grotesque anti-Narcissus. At last he flung himself on the earth, and gave free course to his anguish.

The grace of repentance is rarely denied us when our misdeeds have proved unprofitable. Marcobad awkwardly approached.

“Brother,” he whispered, “I will restore the tincture of which I have deprived thee, and add thereto an antidote, if such may be found. Await my return under this camphor tree.”

So saying, he hastened up the path by which Sorianus had descended, and was speedily out of sight.

III

Sorianus tarried long under the camphor tree, but at last, becoming weary, resumed his travels, until emerging from the wilderness he entered the dominions of the King of Ayodhya. His extraordinary appearance speedily attracted the attention of the royal officers, by whom he was apprehended and brought before his majesty.

“It is evident,” pronounced the monarch, after bestowing his attention on the case, “that thou art in possession of an object too rare and precious for a private individual, of which thou must accordingly be deprived. I lament the inconvenience thou wilt sustain. I would it had been thy hand or thy foot.”

Sorianus acknowledged the royal considerateness, but pleaded the indefeasible right of property which he conceived himself to have acquired in his own head.

“In respect,” responded the royal logician, “that thy head is conjoined to thy shoulders, it is thine; but in respect that it is purple, it is mine, purple being a royal monopoly. Thy claim is founded on anatomy, mine on jurisprudence. Shall matter prevail over mind? Shall medicine, the most uncertain of sciences, override law, the perfection of human reason? It is but to the vulgar observation that thou appearest to have a head at all; in the eye of the law thou art acephalous.”

“I would submit,” urged the philosopher, “that the corporal connection of my head with my body is an essential property, the colour of it a fortuitous accident.”

“Thou mightest as well contend,” returned the king, “that the law is bound to regard thee in thy abstract condition as a human being, and is disabled from taking cognisance of thy acquired capacity of smuggler—rebel, I might say, seeing that thou hast assumed the purple.”

“But the imputation of cruelty which might attach to your majesty’s proceedings?”

“There can be no cruelty where there is no injustice. If any there be, it must be on thy part, since, as I have demonstrated, so far from my despoiling thee of thy head, it is thou who iniquitously withholdest mine. I will labour to render this even clearer to thy apprehension. Thou art found, as thou must needs admit, in possession of a contraband article forfeit to the crown by operation of law. What then? Shall the intention of the legislature be frustrated because thou hast insidiously rendered the possession of *my* property inseparable from the possession of *thine*? Shall I, an innocent proprietor, be mulcted of my right by thy fraud and covin? Justice howls, righteousness weeps, integrity stands aghast at the bare notion. No, friend, thy head has not a leg to stand on. Wouldst thou retain it, it behoves thee to show that it will be more serviceable to the owner, namely, myself, upon thy shoulders than elsewhere. This may well be. Hast thou peradventure any subtleties in perfumery? any secrets in confectionery? any skill in the preparation of soup?”

“I have condescended to none of these frivolities, O king. My study hath ever consisted in divine philosophy, whereby men are rendered equal to the gods.”

“And yet long most of all for purple!” retorted the monarch, “as I conclude from perceiving thou hast after all preferred the latter. Thy head must indeed be worth the taking.”

“Thy taunt is merited, O king! I will importune thee no longer. Thou wilt indeed render me a service in depriving me of this wretched head, hideous without, and I must fear, empty within, seeing that it hath not prevented me from wasting my life in the service of vanity and luxury. Woe to the sage who trusts his infirm wisdom and frail integrity within the precincts of a court! Yet can I foretell a time when philosophers shall no longer run on the futile and selfish errands of kings, and when kings shall be suffered to rule only so far as they obey the bidding of philosophers. Peace, Knowledge, Liberty—”

The King of Ayodhya possessed, beyond all princes of his age, the art of gracefully interrupting an unseasonable discourse. He slightly signed to a courtier in attendance, a scimitar flashed for a moment from its scabbard, and the head of Sorianus rolled on the pavement; the lips murmuring as though still striving to dwell with inarticulate fondness upon the last word of hope for mankind.

It soon appeared that the principle of life was essential to the resplendence of the Purple Head. Within a few minutes it had assumed so ghastly a hue that the Rajah himself was intimidated, and directed that it should be consumed with the body.

The same full-moon that watched the white-robed throng busied with the rites of incremation in a grove of palms, beheld also the seven dragons contending for the body of Marcobad. But, for many a year, the maids and matrons of Rome were not weary of regarding, extolling, and coveting the priceless purple tissue that glowed in the fane of Jupiter Capitolinus.