

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE SHAVING OF
SHAGPAT; AN ARABIAN
ENTERTAINMENT.
VOLUME 2

George Meredith
The Shaving of Shagpat; an
Arabian entertainment. Volume 2

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THE BETROTHAL

Now, when Shibli Bagarag had ceased speaking, the Vizier smiled gravely, and shook his beard with satisfaction, and said to the Eclipser of Reason, 'What opinest thou of this nephew of the barber, O Noorna bin

Noorka?'

She answered, "O Feshnavat, my father, truly I am content with the bargain of my betrothal. He, Wullahy, is a fair youth of flowing speech.' Then she said, 'Ask thou him what he opineth of me, his betrothed?'"

So the Vizier put that interrogation to Shibli Bagarag, and the youth was in perplexity; thinking, 'Is it possible to be joyful in the embrace of one that hath brought thwackings upon us, serious blows?' Thinking, 'Yet hath she, when the mood cometh, kindly looks; and I marked her eye dwelling on me admiringly!' And he thought, 'Mayhap she that groweth younger and counteth nature

backwards, hath a history that would affect me; or, it may be, my kisses—wah! I like not to give them, and it is said,

"Love is wither'd by the withered lip";

and that,

"On bones become too prominent he'll trip."

Yet put the case, that my kisses—I shower them not, Allah the All-seeing is my witness! and they be given daintily as 'twere to the leaf of a nettle, or over-hot pilau. Yet haply kisses repeated might restore her to a bloom, and it is certain youth is somehow stolen from her, if the Vizier Feshnavat went before her, and his blood be her blood; and he is powerful, she wise. I'll decide to act the part of a rejoicer, and express of her opinions honeyed to the soul of that sex.'

Now, while he was thus debating he hung his head, and the Vizier awaited his response, knitting his brows angrily at the delay, and at the last he cried, 'What! no answer? how 's this? Shall thy like dare hold debate when questioned of my like? And is my daughter Noorna bin Noorka, thinkest thou, a slave-girl in the market,—thou haggling at her price, O thou nephew of the barber?'

So Shibli Bagarag exclaimed, 'O exalted one, bestower of the bride! surely I debated with myself but for appropriate terms; and I delayed to select the metre of the verse fitting my thoughts of her, and my wondrous good fortune, and the honour done me.'

Then the Vizier, 'Let us hear: we listen.'

And Shibli Bagarag was advised to deal with illustrations

in his dilemma, by-ways of expression, and spake in extemporaneous verse, and with a full voice:

The pupils of the Sage for living Beauty sought;
And one a Vision clasped, and one a Model wrought.
'I have it!' each exclaimed, and rivalry arose:
'Paint me thy Maid of air!' 'Thy Grace of clay disclose.'
'What! limbs that cannot move!' 'What! lips that melt away!'
'Keep thou thy Maid of air!' 'Shroud up thy Grace of clay!'
'Twas thus, contending hot, they went before the Sage,
And knelt at the wise wells of cold ascetic age.
'The fairest of the twain, O father, thou record':

He answered, 'Fairest she who's likest to her lord.'

Said they, 'What fairer thing matched with them might prevail?'

The Sage austerely smiled, and said, 'Yon monkey's tail.'

'Tis left for after-time his wisdom to declare:
That's loveliest we best love, and to ourselves compare.
Yet lovelier than all hands shape or fancies build,
The meanest thing of earth God with his fire hath filled.

Now, when Shibli Bagarag ceased, Noorna bin Noorka cried, 'Enough, O wondrous turner of verse, thou that art honest!' And she laughed loudly, rustling like a bag of shavings, and rolling in her laughter.

Then said she, 'O my betrothed, is not the thing thou wouldst

say no other than—

"Each to his mind doth the fairest enfold,
For broken long since was Beauty's mould";

and, "Thou that art old, withered, I cannot flatter thee, as I can in no way pay compliments to the monkey's tail of high design; nevertheless the Sage would do thee honour"? So read I thy illustration, O keen of wit! and thou art forgiven its boldness, my betrothed,—Wullahy! utterly so.'

Now, the youth was abashed at her discernment, and the kindness of her manner won him to say:

There's many a flower of sweetness, there's many a gem of
earth
Would thrill with bliss our being, could we perceive its worth.
O beauteous is creation, in fashion and device!
If I have fail'd to think thee fair, 'tis blindness is my vice.

And she answered him:

I've proved thy wit and power of verse,
That is at will diffuse and terse:
Lest thou commence to lie—be dumb!
I am content: the time will come!

Then she said to the Vizier Feshnavat, 'O my father, there is all in this youth, the nephew of the barber, that's desirable

for the undertaking; and his feet will be on a level with the task we propose for him, he the height of man above it. 'Tis clear that vanity will trip him, but honesty is a strong upholder; and he is one that hath the spirit of enterprise and the mask of dissimulation: gratitude I observe in him; and it is as I thought when I came upon him on the sand-hill outside the city, that his star is clearly in a web with our star, he destined for the Shaving of Shagpat.'

So the Vizier replied, 'He hath had thwackings, yet is he not deterred from making further attempt on Shagpat. I think well of him, and I augur hopefully. Wullahy! the Cadi shall be sent for; I can sleep in his secresy; and he shall perform the ceremonies of betrothal, even now and where we sit, and it shall be for him to write the terms of contract: so shall we bind the youth firmly to us, and he will be one of us as we are, devoted to the undertaking by three bonds—the bond of vengeance, the bond of ambition, and that of love.'

Now, so it was that the Vizier despatched a summons for the attendance of the Cadi, and he carne and performed between Shibli Bagarag and Noorna bin Noorka ceremonies of betrothal, and wrote terms of contract; and they were witnessed duly by the legal number of witnesses, and so worded that he had no claim on her as wife till such time as the Event to which he bound himself was mastered. Then the fees being paid, and compliments interchanged, the Vizier exclaimed, 'Be ye happy! and let the weak cling to the strong; and be ye two to one in

this world, and no split halves that betray division and stick not together when the gum is heated.' Then he made a sign to the Cadi and them that had witnessed the contract to follow him, leaving the betrothed ones to their own company.

So when they were alone Noorna gazed on the youth wistfully, and said in a soft tone, 'Thou art dazed with the adventure, O youth! Surely there is one kiss owing me: art thou willing? Am I reduced to beg it of thee? Or dream'st thou?'

He lifted his head and replied, 'Even so.'

Thereat he stood up languidly, and went to her and kissed her. And she smiled and said, 'I wot it will be otherwise, and thou wilt learn swiftness of limb, brightness of eye, and the longing for earthly beatitude, when next I ask thee, O my betrothed!'

Lo! while she spake, new light seemed in her; and it was as if a splendid jewel were struggling to cast its beams through the sides of a crystal vase smeared with dust and old dirt and spinnings of the damp spider. He was amazed, and cried, 'How's this? What change is passing in thee?'

She said, 'Joy in thy kiss, and that I have 'scaped Shagpat.'

Then he: 'Shagpat? How? had that wretch claim over thee ere I came?'

But she looked fearfully at the corners of the room and exclaimed, 'Hush, my betrothed! speak not of him in that fashion, 'tis dangerous; and my power cannot keep off his emissaries at all times.' Then she said, 'O my betrothed, know me a sorceress ensorcelled; not that I seem, but that I shall be! Wait thou for

the time and it will reward thee. What! thou think'st to have plucked a wrinkled o'erripe fruit,—a mouldy pomegranate under the branches, a sour tamarind? 'Tis well! I say nought, save that time will come, and be thou content. It is truly as I said, that I have thee between me and Shagpat; and that honoured one of this city thought fit in his presumption to demand me in marriage at the hands of my father, knowing me wise, and knowing the thing that transformed me to this, the abominable fellow! Surely my father entertained not his proposal save with scorn; but the King looked favourably on it, and it is even now matter of reproach to Feshnavat, my father, that he withholdeth me from Shagpat.'

Quoth Shibli Bagarag, 'A clothier, O Noorna, control the Vizier! and demand of him his daughter in marriage! and a clothier influence the King against his Vizier!'—tis, wullahy! a riddle.'

She replied, "Tis even so, eyes of mine, my betrothed! but thou know'st not Shagpat, and that he is. Lo! the King, and all of this city save we three, are held in enchantment by him, and made foolish by one hair that's in his head.'

Shibli Bagarag started in his seat like one that shineth with a discovery, and cried, 'The Identical!'

Then she, sighing, "Tis that indeed! but the Identical of Identicals, the chief and head of them, and I, woe's me! I, the planter of it.'

So he said, 'How so?'

But she cried, 'I'll tell thee not here, nor aught of myself and

him, and the Genie held in bondage by me, till thou art proved by adventure, and we float peacefully on the sea of the Bright Lily: there shalt thou see me as I am, and hear my story, and marvel at it; for 'tis wondrous, and a manifestation of the Power that dwelleth unseen.'

So Shibli Bagarag pondered awhile on the strange nature of the things she hinted, and laughter seized him as he reflected on Shagpat, and the whole city enchanted by one hair in his head; and he exclaimed, 'O Noorna, knoweth he, Shagpat, of the might in him?'

She answered, 'Enough for his vain soul that homage is paid to him, and he careth not for the wherefore!'

Shibli Bagarag fixed his eyes on the deep-flowered carpets of the floor, as if reading there a matter quaintly written, and smiled, saying, 'What boldness was mine—the making offer to shear Shagpat, the lion in his lair, he that holdeth a whole city in enchantment! Wah! 'twas an instance of daring!'

And Noorna said, 'Not only an entire city, but other cities affected by him, as witness Oolb, whither thou wilt go; and there be governments and states, and conditions of men remote, that hang upon him, Shagpat. 'Tis even so; I swell not his size. When thou hast mastered the Event, and sent him forth shivering from thy blade like the shorn lamb, 'twill be known how great a thing has been achieved, and a record for the generations to come; choice is that historian destined to record it!'

Quoth he, looking eagerly at her, 'O Noorna, what is it in thy

speech affecteth me? Surely it infuseth the vigour of wine, old wine; and I shiver with desire to shave Shagpat, and spin threads for the historian to weave in order. I, wullahy! had but dry visions of the greatness destined for me till now, my betrothed! Shall I master an Event in shaving him, and be told of to future ages? By Allah and his Prophet (praise be to that name!), this is greatness! Say, Noorna, hadst thou foreknowledge of me and my coming to this city?'

So she said, 'I was on the roofs one night among the stars ere moonrise, O my betrothed, and 'twas close on the rise of this very month's moon. The star of our enemy, Shagpat, was large and red, mine as it were menaced by its proximity, nigh swallowed in its haughty beams and the steady overbearings of its effulgence. 'Twas so as it had long been, when suddenly, lo! a star from the upper heaven that shot down between them wildly, and my star took lustre from it; and the star of Shagpat trembled like a ring on a tightened rope, and waved and flickered, and seemed to come forward and to retire; and 'twas presently as a comet in the sky, bright,—a tadpole, with large head and lengthy tail, in the assembly of the planets. This I saw: and that the stranger star was stationed by my star, shielding it, and that it drew nearer to my star, and entered its circle, and that the two stars seemed mixing the splendour that was theirs. Now, that sight amazed me, and my heart in its beating quickened with the expectation of things approaching. Surely I rendered praise, and pressed both hands on my bosom, and watched, and behold!

the comet, the illumined tadpole, was becoming restless beneath the joint rays of the twain that were dominating him; and he diminished, and lashed his tail uneasily, half madly, darting as do captured beasts from the fetters that constrain them. Then went there from thy star—for I know now 'twas thine—a momentary flash across the head of the tadpole, and again another and another, rapidly, pertinaciously. And from thy star there passed repeated flashes across the head of the tadpole, till his brilliance was as 'twere severed from him, and he, like drossy silver, a dead shape in the conspicuous heavens. And he became yellow as the rolling eyes of sick wretches in pain, and shrank in his place like pale parchment at the touch of flame; dull was he as an animal fascinated by fear, and deprived of all power to make head against the foe, darkness, that now beset him, and usurped part of his yet lively tail, and settled on his head, and coated part of his body. So when this tadpole, that was once terrible to me, became turbaned, shoed, and shawled with darkness, and there was little of him remaining visible, lo! a concluding flash shot from thy star, and he fell heavily down the sky and below the hills, into the sea, that is the Enchanted Sea, whose Queen is Rabesqurat, Mistress of Illusions. Now when my soul recovered from amazement at the marvels seen, I arose and went from the starry roofs to consult my books of magic, and 'twas revealed to me that one was wandering to a junction with my destiny, and that by his means the great aim would of a surety be accomplished—Shagpat Shaved! So my purpose was to discover

him; and I made calculations, and summoned them that serve me to search for such a youth as thou art; fairly, O my betrothed, did I preconceive thee. And so it was that I traced a magic line from the sand-hills to the city, and from the outer hills to the sand-hills; and whoso approached by that line I knew was he marked out as my champion, my betrothed,—a youth destined for great things. Was I right? The egg hatcheth. Thou art already proved by thwackings, seasoned to the undertaking, and I doubt not thou art he that will finish with that tadpole Shagpat, and sit in the high seat, thy name an odour in distant lands, a joy to the historian, the Compiler of Events, thou Master of the Event, the greatest which time will witness for ages to come.'

When she had spoken Shibli Bagarag considered her words, and the knowledge that he was selected by destiny as Master of the Event inflated him; and he was a hawk in eagerness, a peacock in pride, an ostrich in fulness of chest, crying, 'O Noorna bin Noorka! is't really so? Truly it must be, for the readers of planets were also busy with me at the time of my birth, interpreting of me in excessive agitation; and the thing they foretold is as thou foretellest. I am, wullahy! marked: I walk manifest in the eye of Providence.'

Thereupon he exulted, and his mind strutted through the future of his days, and down the ladder of all time, exacting homage from men, his brethren; and 'twas beyond the art of Noorna to fix him to the present duties of the enterprise: he was as feathered seed before the breath of vanity.

Now, while the twain discoursed, she of the preparations for shaving Shagpat, he of his completion of the deed, and the honours due to him as Master of the Event, Feshnavat the Vizier returned to them from his entertainment of the Cadi; and he had bribed him to silence with a mighty bribe. So he called to them—

'Ho! be ye ready to commence the work? and have ye advised together as to the beginning? True is that triplet:

"Whatever enterprize man hath,
For waking love or curbing wrath,
'Tis the first step that makes a path."

And how have ye determined as to that first step?'

Noorna replied, 'O my father! we have not decided, and there hath been yet no deliberation between us as to that.'

Then he said, 'All this while have ye talked, and no deliberation as to that! Lo, I have drawn the Cadi to our plot, and bribed him with a mighty bribe; and I have prepared possible disguises for this nephew of the barber; and I have had the witnesses of thy betrothal despatched to foreign parts, far kingdoms in the land of Roum, to prevent tattling and gabbling; and ye that were left alone for debating as to the great deed, ye have not yet deliberated as to that! Is't known to ye, O gabblers, aught of the punishment inflicted by Shahpesh, the Persian, on Khopil, the Builder?—a punishment that, by Allah!'

Shibli Bagarag said, 'How of that punishment, O Vizier?'

And the Vizier narrated as followeth.

AND THIS IS THE PUNISHMENT OF SHAHPESH, THE PERSIAN, ON KHIPIL, THE BUILDER

They relate that Shahpesh, the Persian, commanded the building of a palace, and Khipil was his builder. The work lingered from the first year of the reign of Shahpesh even to his fourth. One day Shahpesh went to the riverside where it stood, to inspect it. Khipil was sitting on a marble slab among the stones and blocks; round him stretched lazily the masons and stonecutters and slaves of burden; and they with the curve of humorous enjoyment on their lips, for he was reciting to them adventures, interspersed with anecdotes and recitations and poetic instances, as was his wont. They were like pleased flocks whom the shepherd hath led to a pasture freshened with brooks, there to feed indolently; he, the shepherd, in the midst.

Now, the King said to him, 'O Khipil, show me my palace where it standeth, for I desire to gratify my sight with its fairness.'

Khipil abased himself before Shahpesh, and answered, "Tis even here, O King of the age, where thou delightest the earth with thy foot and the ear of thy slave with sweetness. Surely a site of vantage, one that dominateth earth, air, and water, which is the builder's first and chief requisition for a noble palace, a palace to fill foreign kings and sultans with the distraction of envy; and

it is, O Sovereign of the time, a site, this site I have chosen, to occupy the tongues of travellers and awaken the flights of poets!

Shahpesh smiled and said, "The site is good! I laud the site! Likewise

I laud the wisdom of Ebn Busrac, where he exclaims:

"Be sure, where Virtue faileth to appear,
For her a gorgeous mansion men will rear;
And day and night her praises will be heard,
Where never yet she spake a single word."

Then said he, 'O Khipil, my builder, there was once a farm servant that, having neglected in the seed-time to sow, took to singing the richness of his soil when it was harvest, in proof of which he displayed the abundance of weeds that coloured the land everywhere. Discover to me now the completeness of my halls and apartments, I pray thee, O Khipil, and be the excellence of thy construction made visible to me!'

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