

# VARIOUS

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**THE SULTAN'S BEAR. <sup>1</sup>**

The sultan being one day rather out of sorts, sent for his Jewish physician, a man very eminent for skill in his profession, and not less distinguished by his love of his own nation and his desperate enmity to the Christians. Finding that his patient had not really much the matter with him, and thinking a little gossip would not only be more agreeable, but more likely to do him good, than any medicine which could be prescribed, the doctor began to discourse on the very familiar topic of his highness's favourite bear, which was lying at his feet, and whose virtues and abilities he was never tired of extolling.

'You would wonder,' said the sultan, 'not only at the natural sagacity of the creature, and the tact which he shews in a thousand different ways, but at the amount of knowledge he has collected, and the logical correctness with which he uses it. He is really a very knowing beast.' The Jew politely acquiesced in all this and much more; but at length added: 'It is well that such a clever animal is in such good hands. If his extraordinary talents are not developed to the utmost, they are at least not perverted and made a bad use of.'

'I hope not, indeed,' said the sultan. 'But what do you mean by his talents not being developed? or in what way would they be likely to be perverted in bad hands?'

'Pardon me,' said the Jew; 'I have spoken rashly before your sublime highness—such things should not be talked of; but it is natural that, although I know very little about them, I should consider the practice and the purpose bad, when they belong to what I consider a bad people: at the same time, if your sublime highness thinks fit to tolerate them, it is not for your faithful slave to say a word about it. I should be sorry that your sublime highness should not extend to your Christian subjects the same toleration and paternal kindness my own people enjoy.'

'What in the world do you mean?' said the sultan. 'What have the Christians to do with my bear?'

'Nothing at all,' replied the Jew with great earnestness; and he added, with a sigh, 'that is the very thing I am thankful for. It is such a remarkable creature, that there is no saying what might come of it.'

'Come of what?' said the sultan.

'Why,' said the Jew, in a humble and very confidential tone, 'your sublime highness is of course aware, that among the many curious secrets the Christians possess, they have one which enables them to teach bears to read.'

'You don't say so?' exclaimed the sultan. 'How do they contrive it?'

'Ah,' replied the Jew with an internal shudder, 'that is more than I can tell your sublime highness. I don't suppose that half-a-dozen of your subjects, except themselves, are aware of the fact; and few even among the Christians know the secret. I only obtained the little knowledge I have by accidental circumstances, which put me upon the inquiry; and I was a long while before I could feel perfectly certain that they actually did the thing. *How* they did it, and *why*, I have never been able to learn. It is one of their greatest secrets, one of their deepest, and therefore, I suspect, one of their most pernicious mysteries. I do not suppose that any man among them would confess it to save his life—not even the old patriarch, if he were put to the rack.'

'It is very strange,' said the sultan, after a pause.

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<sup>1</sup> This is in substance a tradition still current among those Eastern Christians who are 'dwellers in Mesopotamia.'

'It is wonderful,' said the physician with much emphasis.

'What is the harm of it?' exclaimed the sultan abruptly after a pause. 'Why should not bears read as well as men, if they are capable of learning?'

'Most true and most wisely said,' replied the Jew. 'If they were taught to read good books, it would probably mend their manners. But if that were all, why should there be so much mystery about it? why should these people do it so secretly, and deny it so stoutly?' and again he shook his head, and shuddered. But being fully persuaded that he had gained his point, he thought it safest to change the subject; and accordingly he did so as soon as he had emphatically and earnestly entreated the sultan not to say a word of the secret he had been led to impart, or, at all events, not to let it be known that *he* had given any information on the subject.

When the doctor was gone, the sultan fell into a reverie on the advantages and disadvantages of his bear learning to read. When he went to bed, the same train of thought kept him awake; and after a sleepless night, he sent early in the morning for the patriarch. The venerable Mar Yusef lost no time in obeying the summons. Taking his patriarchal staff in his hand, and followed by his two deacons with their heads bare, and their hands crossed on their bosoms, he silently bent his way towards the palace, pondering in his mind on all the various things he could think of as possible causes for his being wanted by the sultan. The sultan dismissed all his attendants; and as soon as he and the patriarch were alone, he beckoned him to approach, and when the aged ecclesiastic had come quite close, and again bowed, not only out of respect, but instinctively, as one does who expects a whisper, the sultan said in a low, earnest tone: 'You know my bear?'

'I do, please your sublime highness,' replied Mar Yusef; 'and a very fine bear he is.'

'I know that,' answered the sultan; 'but the matter is this,' and he lowered his voice, and increased the earnestness of his tone: 'You must teach him to read.'

'To read!' exclaimed the patriarch, thunderstruck. 'To read! the thing is impossible.'

'Of course, I knew you would say that,' said the sultan; 'you must do it, however, or it will be the worse for you and for all your people.'

'Most willingly would I do that, or anything lawful, to shew my respect for your sublime highness,' said the astonished patriarch; 'but, as I have already had the honour to observe, the thing is impossible.'

'Don't tell me,' said the sultan. 'I know more about the matter than you imagine. There is no use in trying to conceal it. I know upon undoubted authority, that you have taught bears, and many of them, I daresay, of less capacity than mine. I shall send him to you this evening, and if you do not bring him back in six weeks able to read, it will be as I have already told you—at your peril, and to the ruin of all that belong to you. So, now, do not waste time, for I am quite in earnest about it; but go and make preparations to receive him, for he has been used to courteous treatment.'

This speech was accompanied by a wave of the hand, which precluded all reply, and the troubled patriarch silently and slowly withdrew.

'My children,' said the patriarch on his way home, addressing the two young men who were supporting him, 'the sultan has resolved to destroy us, and all the Christians in his dominions. He is seeking occasion against us. He does not make open war upon us; but he secretly commands us to do what is impossible, in order that he may have a pretext for our destruction. He requires that in six weeks we should teach his bear to read!'

'The old brute!' exclaimed the deacon Timothy.

'My father,' said the other deacon, Titus, 'suffer me to speak.'

'Speak, my son,' replied the aged man, in a voice scarcely articulate, while he gently withdrew his hand, and laid it on the deacon's head; 'what wouldst thou say?'

'Under favour, most dear and reverend father,' replied Titus, 'I would say that, whatever the sultan's design may be, you should not be discouraged; and that if you will only do one thing, which

I earnestly entreat you to do, I will cheerfully undertake all the rest, and I doubt not that we may get clear through this difficulty.'

'What would you have me do, my son?' said the patriarch.

'Just this,' replied the deacon, 'if I may be permitted to advise: go back to the sultan as quickly as possible, and say that, on consideration, you are sorry that you hesitated—that you will be happy to receive his bear—that you will do your best, and hope to give him satisfaction in the matter.'

'What! my son,' said the patriarch, 'would you have me go to the sultan, and undertake to teach his bear *to read*? You do not know how difficult it is even to teach young children.' But the deacon pleaded so earnestly, that his superior at length consented; and returning to the palace, the patriarch signified to the sultan, that he had thought better of the subject, and was willing to do anything in his power to give his sublime highness satisfaction.

'No doubt you can, if you will,' said the sultan hastily, but not in ill-humour; 'and I expect you to do it—you might as well have agreed to it at once.'

When the patriarch was at home, seated in his armchair, with his deacons standing on each side, and a little recovered from the fatigue of the walk, he turned to Titus, and said: 'Well, my son, and what am I to do now?'

'Nothing, my father,' replied the deacon cheerfully. 'You have done all I asked you to do, and what remains I will readily undertake.'

So he made his bow, and set off to make his arrangements. He chose a little square room up one pair of stairs in the north turret, and parted off about a third of it with strong horizontal bars, six inches apart. The two lowest bars were movable, and the spaces between them left open, to admit air and light, as well as to allow the inmate to go in and be brought out at the pleasure of his keepers; but all above them were boarded over, except that one which was of such a height as would be about even with the bear's head when he should stand on his hind legs. This space was left open along the whole length of the den, so that, in any part of it, he could very conveniently put forth his nose far enough to look about him.

'And now,' said Titus to his comrade Timothy, when he had completed these preparations, 'I must go to seek for a book and a desk; and if they bring the bear before I come back, will you be so good as to see him put in, and also to mind that the other end of the chain, which I have padlocked to the staple in the wall, is fastened to his collar, and is long enough to allow of his lying down comfortably in the straw, and taking a little turn backwards and forwards, if he likes? and don't let them give him anything to eat, and take care not to be out of the way—that is a good fellow.'

'You may depend upon me,' said Timothy; and Titus went off to the church, to see about a lectionary, for the bear to study, though, to say the truth, not entirely, or even principally, with that intention; for he did not mean that his pupil should commence that day, or the next; and he was in no doubt which to choose among many old lectionaries that had been laid aside. There was an immense one, with great brass knobs and corners, out of which he had himself learned to chant long before he could lift it, and indeed, now that he was come to man's estate, it was as much as he could carry. This book he meant to use; but for the present he contented himself with observing from the window the bear coming to school in procession; and when he was satisfied that his pupil was in safe custody, he descended from the church-tower, and went to see after him. When he came to the door of the apartment, he waited a moment to listen to what seemed an interchange of anything but civilities between Timothy and his charge. Titus called out his colleague; and, without going in himself, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

'Won't you go in and look at him?' said Timothy, as they went down the staircase together.

'Time enough,' said Titus; 'he will be better by himself just at present. Had you much trouble in getting him in? How did he behave?'

'Rather restive,' replied Timothy; 'but we managed it among us. Should not he have something to eat?'

'No,' said Titus; 'he has got plenty of water; he will do very well. But now come and help me down with the old lectionary from the upper vestry, for I don't think I can get it down that staircase myself.' Between them the lectionary was safely brought down, and deposited, not in the apartment, which we may now call the school-room, but in the chamber of Titus, on a massy oak desk or lectern, which turned upon its pedestal, and which they brought out from the patriarch's library for the purpose.

It was well that the school-room was rather remote, and had thick walls; for, missing his supper, the bear naturally became not only hungry, but savage, growled in the most ferocious manner, and rampaged about his cage like a fury. But he got nothing by it; and when he had drunk up the water, and exhausted his powers of growling and raging, he went to sleep. In the morning, Titus brought him merely some fresh water and a cake of barley-bread; but in the afternoon, thinking it was now time for his pupil—who was tolerably tame after his unwonted exercise and fasting—to begin his studies, he brought with him the great book he had prepared for his use, and placed it open on the desk, which now stood before the horizontal opening between the bars already described. All the morning had been employed in preparing the desk and the book; and the former was now so contrived that, by means of a screw, the latter could be raised or lowered at pleasure. The book was no sooner placed before the opening, at the distance of a few inches, than the bear, which was on the look-out to see what was going forward, began to snuff and poke, and shewed a most eager desire to reach it. In fact, all along the lines of large letters, which were widely divided by the musical staves, the tutor, well knowing the taste of his pupil, had stuck little figs, dates, raisins, almonds, morsels of cake, comfits, and dried fruits; in short, all such little sweet things as bears so particularly delight in. The book was placed at such a height and distance, that the pupil could only reach the top line; and the eager manner in which he cleared it, gave promise that he would prove an apt scholar in that branch of learning. One page only was thus prepared for him; for at that period of his education it would have been impossible, without harsher measures than his tutor wished to adopt, to prevent him from cross-readings, which would greatly have blemished his scholarship. Some minor offences, such, for instance, as inordinate efforts to begin upon a second line before he had regularly perused the first, were punished by switching him on the nose, turning the double desk round—in which case it presented him with a mirror, that frightened him dreadfully—or even, in case of perverseness, leaving him to himself, without giving him the substantial honey-cake, which always rewarded a well-said lesson. In a short time the parties began to understand one another, and as Titus had prudently taken care to be known to his pupil only as a benefactor, he soon gained his confidence. The bear who, like all his race, had an ardent love for such dainties, found that he was welcome to eat all he could get, if he did but do it in a decent methodical manner. He soon learned, therefore, to take each line as it came; and, indeed, after a short time, his instructor not only ventured to cover the lines of the two open pages at the same time, but by enlarging the opening in front of his cell, he put it in his pupil's power to go on from one line to another without the book being raised; and after the tutor had for a week or two turned the leaf when necessary, the pupil began to shew that, if it was not done for him, he could do it for himself.

As the time drew on, the patriarch was most anxious to know, but did not venture to ask, how matters were going on. At length he summoned courage, and put the question, somewhat indirectly, to Titus; and although he received no particulars, yet he could not help feeling comforted by the cheerful manner in which his affectionate deacon assured him that everything was going on rightly, and that he need have no fear for the result.

In the meantime, the sultan, though less anxious, was intensely curious to see what would come of the matter, and frequently entered into conversation on the subject with his physician, who was, on somewhat different grounds, still more curious than himself. His sublime highness, however, who could not expect from a Jew much information respecting the secrets and mysteries of the Christians, rather confined the discourse between them to the physiological part of the subject, expressing his

wonder—first, that bears should be able to learn to read; and, secondly, that such a capacity was not more frequently cultivated, asking him, withal, whether he had ever himself heard a bear read? The doctor, in parliamentary fashion, blinked the question; observing that as it was done by secret practices, and no doubt for wicked purposes, it was best to say as little as possible about it. His sublime highness was not altogether satisfied, but comforted himself with thinking that time would soon throw light on the matter.

At length the day arrived when the bear's proficiency was to be put to the test. The sultan was seated on a divan in his hall of audience; his ministers and officers of state stood on either side; and behind him knelt his Jewish physician, who assumed that position, because, although he would not have failed, even at the hazard of his life, to be present, yet he had no strict right to be there; and, moreover, he did not particularly wish to be seen in the business. All were in breathless expectation when the Christian procession entered. The patriarch walked first, with his crosier in his hand; next came Titus, the tutor, bowed down under the huge lectionary, which he bore upon his back, secured by leathern straps over his shoulders; then followed Timothy, leading by a chain the carefully-muzzled pupil. This precaution was quite necessary; for, having been kept fasting four-and-twenty hours, the animal was in no good-humour, and would not have been so quietly brought in, if it had not been closely following the favourite book. But, in fact, the only trouble which Timothy had, was to prevent his eager charge from leaping at the volume while it was yet on his tutor's back. The procession was closed by a porter, bearing the desk, who, under the direction of Titus, placed it before the sultan, at such a distance as would conveniently enable the reader to stand between it and his sublime highness, who might thus see the book over his favourite's shoulder. Titus himself, thus relieved of his burden by its transfer to the desk, went round into the reader's place, and opened the ample leaves of the lectionary; while, to the great amusement of the sultan, Timothy was exerting his energies to the utmost to keep back the eager pupil.

'He seems fond of his book, however,' said the sultan; 'that looks well.' And all the circle bowed assent.

At length, having arranged the volume to his satisfaction, Titus received his pupil from the hands of his colleague. The bear stood up manfully to his task; but it need scarcely be said, he was sadly disappointed when he found that, unlike itself, the beloved book contained no sweets; not a morsel, though the often-travelled, much-licked, and still-besmeared lines retained the well-known scent and savour. He ran his nose over one line after another, all down the first page, then down the second, and then somewhat impatiently turned the leaf.

'Well,' cried the sultan, 'he certainly seems to take a great interest in it himself; and he may understand it perfectly, for aught I know; but I wish he would read aloud. I should like to hear him. Will you be so good as to tell him so?' he added, addressing the patriarch.

The venerable Mar Yusef was puzzled, and, as people often do when they are puzzled, he made a bow, but could think of nothing to say. Titus, however, promptly dropped on his knees between the bear and the sultan; and addressing the latter, he said: 'Your sublime highness will hear him presently; be pleased to give him a little time. Let him not be harshly judged, if he is a little timid and shy. This is his first attempt in public.'

As he said this, the deacon saw the twinkle of the Jew's eye over the sultan's shoulder. It was only for a moment, and nobody but Titus himself knew that he had seen it at all, so intently did he seem to be occupied in comforting and encouraging—perhaps we should say exciting, his pupil. The bear, however, being disappointed line after line, and page after page, and only stimulated and irritated by the scent and the slight taste which he could get by thrusting the tip of his tongue through his muzzle, began to growl most awfully, as he still went on mechanically, line after line, and turned the leaves with increased rapidity and vehemence. This continued for some time, until the pupil was evidently getting into a passion, and the tutor was growing rather nervous, when the sultan shewed a disposition to speak, which Titus most thankfully interpreted as an intimation that the experiment

had been carried far enough. He instantly quieted his pupil, not so much by the order which he gave, as by shewing him a honey-cake, which nobody else saw, handed the chain to Timothy, and prepared to listen.

'As I observed before,' said the sultan, 'he certainly does seem to take a vast interest in it himself; and I daresay he understands it: but as to his elocution, I must say that it seems to me somewhat inarticulate.' The patriarch was puzzled again, and again he bowed, lower than before. The Jew chuckled, and whispered something in the sultan's ear. But Titus was not disconcerted. Falling again on his knees, he exclaimed: 'Pardon me, your sublime highness, we consider him a remarkably good reader, an animal of excellent parts, and a pupil who does us great credit. It is true, as your sublime highness's discrimination has observed, that his enunciation, even to those who know the language, may have some appearance of indistinctness, because he is defective in the vowel-points; but we cannot help it, for all our books are unpointed. In this, which, indeed, we consider a matter of little importance, we do not pretend to compete with the Jews, who teach theirs from pointed books. If your sublime highness ever heard a bear read more articulately than this one, it must have been one of theirs; and if you would have your own perfected in that particular, you must put it into their hands.' The sultan stared at the deacon; and the Jew eyed him over the sultan's shoulder with fierce alarm. But the hands of Titus were folded on his breast, and his head was bowed down on his hands.

'Well,' said the sultan to the patriarch, after a pause, during which it was obvious that some things were passing through his mind, of which he said nothing, 'I thank you for the pains you have taken; and although I cannot say that I quite understand the matter now, yet if I had known six weeks ago as much as I do at present, I would not have troubled you. If you are ever in want of any help or protection, remember, as I shall, that you have obliged me.'

The patriarch bowed. The sultan rose and retired, resolved that his first business should be to come to a full explanation with his doctor; and accordingly, a summons for the Israelite was instantly issued. Very long it seemed to the sultan—although, in fact, it was only half an hour—before the vizier came to report, that the doctor was nowhere to be found.

'Well,' said the sultan, 'I do not much wonder at that. I always thought him a wise man, and he is certainly no fool to get out of the way now. But, at the same time, let strict search be made; and also bring me the chief rabbi.'

In the confusion occasioned by the breaking up of the company, the tutor and his pupil—the latter of whom had naturally dropped into the less ostentatious posture of a quadruped—were forgotten, or at least overlooked, by the crowd of courtiers, who rushed to congratulate Mar Yusef, or laid their heads together, to whisper their surprise or their suspicions. Titus, therefore, having briefly given directions to Timothy to take care that the book was removed, and to see the patriarch home, and make an excuse for his staying behind, slipped with his amiable charge through a side-door into the garden, where he seated himself on a bench, while his companion stood opposite to him on his hind legs, looking wistfully, he almost thought reproachfully, in his face. In truth, Titus was conscious that he had tried the temper of his pupil, and was afraid to let him loose before company, or, indeed, to let him go into company at all, until he should have brought him into good-humour. He had provided himself with ample means of doing this; and having produced more than one honey-cake, and several other good things, and laid them on the bench beside him, he did not hesitate to unmuzzle his friend, and a merry meal they made together.

If the master was rendered happy by the issue of an experiment which had been matter of such great and long anxiety, the pupil was also raised to a state of the highest possible good-humour, by being at once relieved from restraint and hunger. He looked cheerily about him; seemed as if for the first time he recognised his old haunts; gamboled through the now deserted hall and passages; and, before he had been missed by anybody, found his way, by a short cut, to his own rug in the sultan's apartment.

For a moment, indeed, while occupied in anticipating the explanation which he had resolved to extort from his doctor, the sultan, like his courtiers, had forgotten his favourite; but now the meeting was most cordial on both sides. The sultan seemed determined to make up for his neglect; and the favourite to shew, that neither scholarship, nor the discipline requisite for obtaining it, had diminished his social affections or companionable qualities.

At length the rabbi arrived. He had, indeed, been a little longer than was necessary on the way, because he had found some means of persuading the messenger to let him call on two or three friends as he came along. He did not lose much time by this, however; his only object being to ask them, to what extent they could help him in case the loan should be very large. Satisfied on this point, and preoccupied by the thoughts which had suggested the inquiry, he stood before the sultan. Great, therefore, was his surprise, when his sublime highness, instead of saying a word about money-matters, briefly, but clearly, explained to him the nature of the business in which his service was required.

'Your sublime highness is pleased to jest with your servant,' said the rabbi, as soon as he could command breath enough to utter the words.

'Not at all,' replied the sultan; 'you will find me quite in earnest, I assure you. He reads, and, I am told, reads as well as can be expected *without* the points; now you must teach him to read *with* them.'

The rabbi was utterly confounded. He could only bow down his head, wondering what the sultan could mean, and what he would say next, and whether it would throw any light on what he had said already. So his sublime highness continued, with some asperity: 'Do not think to deceive me. I know all about the matter. You *can* do it, and you had better not hesitate; for I am in no humour to be trifled with. I gave the Christians six weeks, and I'll give you the same. Don't answer, but go, and he shall be sent to you.'

The unhappy rabbi returned home in a state of bewilderment. He sent for some of his friends to consult with, most of whom were as much surprised as he had been, when they learned the nature of the business which had produced the summons. Only one of them, who happened to be a friend of the missing doctor, seemed to know anything about the matter; and he could not throw much light upon it. He could only tell them, for their comfort, that it was a very serious affair, and they must mind what they were about.

It would be only tiresome, if it were possible, to particularise all the suggestions and discussions which ensued. They were still going on when the bear arrived, and was duly installed in an apartment which had been prepared for him, as well as it could be on such short notice; for all agreed, that he must be treated with great care and attention, not only in order to propitiate him, but because it might be dangerous to let him return in worse condition than he came. So neither trouble nor cost was spared to make him comfortable; and very comfortable he was: supplied with every luxury, crammed with dainties, and petted in every conceivable way. But whatever progress he might make in the study of mankind, and in other branches of useful knowledge, it was plain that he was making none in that particular branch of learning for which he had been sent to school. His instructors did not know how to deal with him. He was on easy terms with all about him, would play with anybody, and quarrelled with nobody; but learn he would not. When they held a book before him, he thrust his nose into the cream-bowl; when they spoke of Pathach and Segol, he shut one eye, and munched figs; and when, 'as a bird each fond endearment tries,' they set up a stave which might have made the very learned the Masorites to dance for joy, in the hope that instinctively, or by mere love of imitation, he might be led to join in the chorus, he only threw himself on his back, and fairly roared them down.

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