

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

NATHAN THE WISE; A
DRAMATIC POEM IN FIVE
ACTS

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Nathan the Wise; a
dramatic poem in five acts

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INTRODUCTION

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born on the 22nd of January, 1729, eldest of ten sons of a pious and learned minister of Camenz in the Oberlausitz, who had two daughters also. As a child Lessing delighted in books, and had knowledge beyond his years when he went to school, in Meissen, at the age of twelve.

As a school-boy he read much Greek and Latin that formed no part of the school course; read also the German poets of his time, wrote a "History of Ancient Mathematics," and began a poem of his own on the "Plurality of Worlds."

In 1746, at the age of seventeen, Lessing was sent to the University of Leipsic. There he studied with energy, and was attracted strongly by the theatre. His artistic interest in the drama caused him to be put on the free list of the theatre, in exchange for some translations of French pieces. Then he produced, also for the Leipsic stage, many slight pieces of his own, and he had serious thought of turning actor, which excited alarm in the parsonage at Camenz and caused his recall home in January,

1747. It was found, however, that although he could not be trained to follow his father's profession, he had been studying to such good purpose, and developing, in purity of life, such worth of character, that after Easter he was sent back to Leipsic, with leave to transfer his studies from theology to medicine.

Lessing went back, continued to work hard, but still also gave all his leisure to the players. For the debts of some of them he had incautiously become surety, and when the company removed to Vienna, there were left behind them unpaid debts for which young Lessing was answerable. The creditors pressed, and Lessing moved to Wittenberg; but he fell ill, and was made so miserable by pressure for impossible payments, that he resolved to break off his studies, go to Berlin, and begin earning by his pen, his first earnings being for the satisfaction of these Leipsic creditors. Lessing went first to Berlin to seek his fortune in December, 1748, when he was nineteen years old. He was without money, without decent clothes, and with but one friend in Berlin, Mylius, who was then editing a small journal, the *Rudigersche Zeitung*. Much correspondence brought him a little money from the overburdened home, and with addition of some small earning from translations, this enabled him to obtain a suit of clothes, in which he might venture to present himself to strangers in his search for fortune. A new venture with Mylius, a quarterly record of the history of the theatre, was not successful; but having charge committed to him of the library part of Mylius's journal, Lessing had an opportunity of showing

his great critical power. Gottsched, at Leipsic, was then leader of the war on behalf of classicism in German literature. Lessing fought on the National side, and opposed also the beginning of a new French influence then rising, which was to have its chief apostle in Rousseau.

In 1752 Lessing went back to Wittenberg for another year, that he might complete the work for graduation; graduated in December of that year as Master of Arts, and then returned to his work in Berlin. He worked industriously, not only as critic, but also in translation from the classics, from French, English, and Italian; and he was soon able to send help towards providing education for the youngest of the household of twelve children in the Camenz parsonage. In 1753 he gave himself eight weeks of withdrawal from other work to write, in a garden-house at Potsdam, his tragedy of "Miss Sarah Sampson." It was produced with great success at Frankfort on the Oder, and Lessing's ruling passion for dramatic literature became the stronger for this first experience of what he might be able to achieve. In literature, Frederick the Great cared only for what was French. A National drama, therefore, could not live in Berlin. In the autumn of 1755, Lessing suddenly moved to Leipsic, where an actor whom he had befriended was establishing a theatre. Here he was again abandoning himself to the cause of a National drama, when a rich young gentleman of Leipsic invited his companionship upon a tour in Europe. Terms were settled, and they set out together. They saw much of Holland, and were passing into England,

when King Frederick's attack on Saxony recalled the young Leipsiger, and caused breach of what had been a contract for a three years' travelling companionship. In May, 1758, Lessing, aged twenty-nine, returned to his old work in Berlin. Again he translated, edited, criticised. He wrote a tragedy, "Philotas," and began a "Faust." He especially employed his critical power in "Letters upon the Latest Literature," known as his *Literatur briefe*. Dissertations upon fable, led also to Lessing's "Fables," produced in this period of his life.

In 1760 Lessing was tempted by scarcity of income to serve as a Government secretary at Breslau. He held that office for five years, and then again returned to his old work in Berlin.

During the five years in Breslau, Lessing had completed his play of "Minna von Barnhelm," and the greatest of his critical works, "Laocoon," a treatise on the "Boundary Lines of Painting and Poetry." All that he might then have saved from his earnings went to the buying of books and to the relief of the burdens in the Camenz parsonage. At Berlin the office of Royal Librarian became vacant. The claims of Lessing were urged, but Frederick appointed an insignificant Frenchman. In 1767 Lessing was called to aid an unsuccessful attempt to establish a National Theatre in Hamburg.

Other troubles followed. Lessing gave his heart to a widow, Eva König, and was betrothed to her. But the involvements of her worldly affairs, and of his, delayed the marriage for six years.

To secure fixed income he took a poor office as Librarian at

Wolfenbüttel. In his first year at Wolfenbüttel, he wrote his play of "Emilia Galotti." Then came a long-desired journey to Italy; but it came in inconvenient form, for it had to be made with Prince Leopold, of Brunswick, hurriedly, for the sake of money, at the time when Lessing was at last able to marry.

The wife, long waited for, and deeply loved, died at the birth of her first child. This was in January, 1778, when Lessing's age was 49. Very soon afterwards he was attacked by a Pastor Goeze, in Hamburg, and other narrow theologians, for having edited papers that contained an attack on Christianity, which Lessing himself had said that he wished to see answered before he died.

The uncharitable bitterness of these attacks, felt by a mind that had been touched to the quick by the deepest of sorrows, helped to the shaping of Lessing's calm, beautiful lesson of charity, this noblest of his plays—"Nathan the Wise." But Lessing's health was shattered, and he survived his wife only three years. He died in 1781, leaving imperishable influence for good upon the minds of men, but so poor in what the world calls wealth, that his funeral had to be paid for by a Duke of Brunswick.

William Taylor, the translator of Lessing's "Nathan the Wise;" was born in 1765, the son of a rich merchant at Norwich, from whose business he was drawn away by his strong bent towards literature. His father yielded to his wishes, after long visits to France and to Germany, in days astir with the new movements of thought, that preceded and followed the French Revolution.

He formed a close friendship with Southey, edited for a little

time a “Norwich Iris,” and in his later years became known especially for his Historic Survey of German Poetry, which included his translations, and among them this of “Nathan the Wise.” It was published in 1830, Taylor died in 1836. Thomas Carlyle, in reviewing William Taylor’s Survey of German Poetry, said of the author’s own translations in it “compared with the average of British translations, they may be pronounced of almost ideal excellence; compared with the best translations extant, for example, the German Shakespeare, Homer, Calderon, they may still be called better than indifferent. One great merit Mr. Taylor has: rigorous adherence to his original; he endeavours at least to copy with all possible fidelity the term of praise, the tone, the very metre, whatever stands written for him.”

H. M.

“Introite nam et heic Dii sunt!”—Apud Gellium.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Saladin, *the Sultan.*

Sittah, *his Sister.*

Nathan, *a rich Jew.*

Recha, *his adopted Daughter.*

Daya, *a Christian Woman dwelling with the Jew a companion to Recha.*

Conrade, *a young Templar.*

Hafi, *a Dervis.*

Athanasios, *the Patriarch of Palestine.*

Bonafides, *a Friar.*

An Emir, sundry Mamalukes, Slaves, &c.

The Scene is at Jerusalem

ACT I

Scene.—A Hall in Nathan's House

Nathan, *in a travelling dress*, Daya *meeting him*

DAYA

'Tis he, 'tis Nathan! Thanks to the Almighty,
That you're at last returned.

NATHAN

Yes, Daya, thanks,
That I have reached Jerusalem in safety.
But wherefore this *at last*? Did I intend,
Or was it possible to come back sooner?
As I was forced to travel, out and in,
'Tis a long hundred leagues to Babylon;

And to get in one's debts is no employment,
That speeds a traveller.

DAYA

O Nathan, Nathan,
How miserable you had nigh become
During this little absence; for your house—

NATHAN

Well, 'twas on fire; I have already heard it.
God grant I may have heard the whole, that chanced!

DAYA

'Twas on the point of burning to the ground.

NATHAN

Then we'd have built another, and a better.

DAYA

True!—But thy Recha too was on the point
Of perishing amid the flames.

NATHAN

Of perishing?
My Recha, saidst thou? She? I heard not that.
I then should not have needed any house.
Upon the point of perishing—perchance
She's gone?—Speak out then—out—torment me not
With this suspense.—Come, tell me, tell me all.

DAYA

Were she no more, from me you would not hear it.

NATHAN

Why then alarm me?—Recha, O my Recha!

DAYA

Your Recha? Yours?

NATHAN

What if I ever were
Doomed to unlearn to call this child, *my* child,

DAYA

Is all you own yours by an equal title?

NATHAN

Nought by a better. What I else enjoy
Nature and Fortune gave—this treasure, Virtue.

DAYA

How dear you make me pay for all your goodness!—
If goodness, exercised with such a view,
Deserves the name.—

NATHAN

With such a view? With what?

DAYA

My conscience—

NATHAN

Daya, let me tell you first—

DAYA

I say, my conscience—

NATHAN

What a charming silk
I bought for you in Babylon! 'Tis rich,
Yet elegantly rich. I almost doubt

If I have brought a prettier for Recha.

DAYA

And what of that—I tell you that my conscience
Will no be longer hushed.

NATHAN

And I have bracelets,
And earrings, and a necklace, which will charm you.
I chose them at Damascus.

DAYA

That's your way:—
If you can but make presents—but make presents.—

NATHAN

Take you as freely as I give—and cease.

DAYA

And cease?—Who questions, Nathan, but that you are
Honour and generosity in person;—
Yet—

NATHAN

Yet I'm but a Jew.—That was your meaning.

DAYA

You better know what was my meaning, Nathan.

NATHAN

Well, well, no more of this,

DAYA

I shall be silent;
But what of sinful in the eye of heaven
Springs out of it—not I, not I could help;
It falls upon thy head.

NATHAN

So let it, Daya.
Where is she then? What stays her? Surely, surely,
You're not amusing me—And does she know
That I'm arrived?

DAYA

That you yourself must speak to,
Terror still vibrates in her every nerve.
Her fancy mingles fire with all she thinks of.
Asleep, her soul seems busy; but awake,
Absent: now less than brute, now more than angel.

NATHAN

Poor thing! What are we mortals—

DAYA

As she lay
This morning sleeping, all at once she started
And cried: “list, list! there come my father’s camels!”
And then she drooped again upon her pillow
And I withdrew—when, lo! you really came.
Her thoughts have only been with you—and him.

NATHAN

And *him*? What him?

DAYA

With him, who from the fire
Preserved her life,

NATHAN

Who was it? Where is he,
That saved my Recha for me?

DAYA

A young templar,
Brought hither captive a few days ago,

And pardoned by the Sultan.

NATHAN

How, a *templar*
Dismissed with life by Saladin. In truth,
Not a less miracle was to preserve her,
God!—God!—

DAYA

Without this man, who risked afresh
The Sultan's unexpected boon, we'd lost her.

NATHAN

Where is he, Daya, where's this noble youth?
Do, lead me to his feet. Sure, sure you gave him
What treasures I had left you—gave him all,
Promised him more—much more?

DAYA

How could we?

NATHAN

Not?

DAYA

He came, he went, we know not whence, or whither.
Quite unacquainted with the house, unguided
But by his ear, he prest through smoke and flame,
His mantle spread before him, to the room
Whence pierced the shrieks for help; and we began
To think him lost—and her; when, all at once,
Bursting from flame and smoke, he stood before us,
She in his arm upheld. Cold and unmoved
By our loud warmth of thanks, he left his booty,
Struggled into the crowd, and disappeared.

NATHAN

But not for ever, Daya, I would hope.

DAYA

For some days after, underneath you palms,
That shade his grave who rose again from death,
We saw him wandering up and down. I went,
With transport went to thank him. I conjured,
Intreated him to visit once again
The dear sweet girl he saved, who longed to shed
At her preserver's feet the grateful tear—

NATHAN

Well?

DAYA

But in vain. Deaf to our warmest prayers,
On me he flung such bitter mockery—

NATHAN

That hence rebuffed—

DAYA

Oh, no, oh, no, indeed not,
Daily I forced myself upon him, daily
Afresh encountered his dry taunting speeches.
Much I have borne, and would have borne much more:
But he of late forbears his lonely walk
Under the scattered palms, which stand about
Our holy sepulchre: nor have I learnt
Where he now is. You seem astonished—thoughtful—

NATHAN

I was imagining what strange impressions
This conduct makes on such a mind as Recha's.
Disdained by one whom she must feel compelled
To venerate and to esteem so highly.
At once attracted and repelled—the combat
Between her head and heart must yet endure,
Regret, Resentment, in unusual struggle.
Neither, perhaps, obtains the upper hand,
And busy fancy, meddling in the fray,
Weaves wild enthusiasms to her dazzled spirit,
Now clothing Passion in the garb of Reason,
And Reason now in Passion's—do I err?
This last is Recha's fate—Romantic notions—

DAYA

Aye; but such pious, lovely, sweet, illusions.

NATHAN

Illusions though.

DAYA

Yes: and the one, her bosom
Clings to most fondly, is, that the brave templar
Was but a transient inmate of the earth,
A guardian angel, such as from her childhood
She loved to fancy kindly hovering round her,
Who from his veiling cloud amid the fire
Stepped forth in her preserver's form. You smile—
Who knows? At least beware of banishing
So pleasing an illusion—if deceitful
Christian, Jew, Mussulman, agree to own it,
And 'tis—at least to her—a dear illusion.

NATHAN

Also to me. Go, my good Daya, go,

See what she's after. Can't I speak with her?
Then I'll find out our untamed guardian angel,
Bring him to sojourn here awhile among us—
We'll pinion his wild wing, when once he's taken.

DAYA

You undertake too much.

NATHAN

And when, my Daya,
This sweet illusion yields to sweeter truth,
(For to a man a man is ever dearer
Than any angel) you must not be angry
To see our loved enthusiast exercised.

DAYA

You are so good—and yet so sly. I'll seek her,
But listen,—yes! she's coming of herself.

Nathan, Daya, *and* Recha

RECHA

And you are here, your very self, my father,
I thought you'd only sent your voice before you.
Where are you then? What mountains, deserts, torrents,
Divide us now? You see me, face to face,
And do not hasten to embrace your Recha.
Poor Recha! she was almost burnt alive,
But only—only—almost. Do not shudder!
O 'tis a horrid end to die in fire!

NATHAN (*embracing her*)

My child, my darling child!

RECHA

You had to cross
The Jordan, Tigris, and Euphrates, and
Who knows what rivers else. I used to tremble
And quake for you, till the fire came so nigh me;
Since then, methinks 'twere comfort, balm, refreshment,
To die by water. But you are not drowned—
I am not burnt alive.—We will rejoice—
We will praise God—the kind good God, who bore thee,
Upon the buoyant wings of *unseen* angels,
Across the treacherous stream—the God who bade
My angel *visibly* on his white wing
Athwart the roaring flame—

NATHAN (*aside*)

White wing?—oh, aye
The broad white fluttering mantle of the templar.

RECHA

Yes, visibly he bore me through the fire,
O'ershadowed by his pinions.—Face to face
I've seen an angel, father, my own angel.

NATHAN

Recha deserves it, and would see in him
No fairer form than he beheld in her,

RECHA

Whom are you flattering, father—tell me now—
The angel, or yourself?

NATHAN

Yet had a man,
A man of those whom Nature daily fashions,
Done you this service, he to you had seemed,
Had been an angel.

RECHA

No, not such a one.
Indeed it was a true and real angel.
And have not you yourself instructed me
How possible it is there may be angels;
That God for those who love him can work miracles—
And I do love him, father—

NATHAN

And he thee;
And both for thee, and all like thee, my child,
Works daily wonders, from eternity
Has wrought them for you.

RECHA

That I like to hear.

NATHAN

Well, and although it sounds quite natural,
An every day event, a simple story,
That you was by a real templar saved,
Is it the less a miracle? The greatest
Of all is this, that true and real wonders
Should happen so perpetually, so daily.
Without this universal miracle
A thinking man had scarcely called those such,
Which only children, Recha, ought to name so,
Who love to gape and stare at the unusual
And hunt for novelty—

DAYA

Why will you then

With such vain subtleties, confuse her brain
Already overheated?

NATHAN

Let me manage.—
And is it not enough then for my Recha
To owe her preservation to a man,
Whom no small miracle preserved himself.
For who'er heard before that Saladin
Let go a templar; that a templar wished it,
Hoped it, or for his ransom offered more
Than taunts, his leathern sword-belt, or his dagger?

RECHA

That makes for me; these are so many reasons
He was no real knight, but only seemed it.
If in Jerusalem no captive templar,
Appears alive, or freely wanders round,
How could I find one, in the night, to save me?

NATHAN

Ingenious! dextrous! Daya, come in aid.
It was from you I learnt he was a prisoner;
Doubtless you know still more about him, speak.

DAYA

'Tis but report indeed, but it is said
That Saladin bestowed upon this youth
His gracious pardon for the strong resemblance
He bore a favourite brother—dead, I think
These twenty years—his name, I know it not—
He fell, I don't know where—and all the story
Sounds so incredible, that very likely
The whole is mere invention, talk, romance.

NATHAN

And why incredible? Would you reject
This story, tho' indeed, it's often done,

To fix on something more incredible,
And give that faith? Why should not Saladin,
Who loves so singularly all his kindred,
Have loved in early youth with warmer fondness
A brother now no more. Do we not see
Faces alike, and is an old impression
Therefore a lost one? Do resembling features
Not call up like emotions. Where's th' incredible?
Surely, sage Daya, this can be to thee
No miracle, or do *thy* wonders only
Demand—I should have said *deserve* belief?

DAYA

You're on the bite.

NATHAN

Were you quite fair with me?
Yet even so, my Recha, thy escape
Remains a wonder, only possible
To Him, who of the proud pursuits of princes
Makes sport—or if not sport—at least delights
To head and manage them by slender threads.

RECHA

If I do err, it is not wilfully,
My father.

NATHAN

No, you have been always docile.
See now, a forehead vaulted thus, or thus—
A nose bow'd one way rather than another—
Eye-brows with straiter, or with sharper curve—
A line, a mole, a wrinkle, a mere nothing
I' th' countenance of an European savage—
And thou—art saved, in Asia, from the fire.
Ask ye for signs and wonders after that?
What need of calling angels into play?

DAYA

But Nathan, where's the harm, if I may speak,

Of fancying one's self by an angel saved,
Rather than by a man? Methinks it brings us
Just so much the nearer the incomprehensive
First cause of preservation.

NATHAN

Pride, rank pride!
The iron pot would with a silver prong
Be lifted from the furnace—to imagine
Itself a silver vase. Paha! Where's the harm?
Thou askest. Where's the good? I might reply.
For thy *it brings us nearer to the Godhead*
Is nonsense, Daya, if not blasphemy.
But it does harm: yes, yes, it does indeed.
Attend now. To the being, who preserved you,
Be he an angel or a man, you both,
And thou especially wouldst gladly show
Substantial services in just requital.
Now to an angel what great services
Have ye the power to do? To sing his praise—
Melt in transporting contemplation o'er him—
Fast on his holiday—and squander alms—
What nothingness of use! To me at least
It seems your neighbour gains much more than he
By all this pious glow. Not by your fasting

Is he made fat; not by your squandering, rich;
Nor by your transports is his glory exalted;
Nor by your faith his might. But to a man—

DAYA

Why yes; a man indeed had furnished us
With more occasions to be useful to him.
God knows how readily we should have seized them.
But then he would have nothing—wanted nothing—
Was in himself wrapped up, and self-sufficient,
As angels are.

RECHA

And when at last he vanished—

NATHAN

Vanished? How vanished? Underneath the palms
Escaped your view, and has returned no more.

Or have you really sought for him elsewhere?

DAYA

No, that indeed we've not.

NATHAN

Not, Daya, not?
See it does harm, hard-hearted, cold enthusiasts,
What if this angel on a bed of illness—

RECHA

Illness?

DAYA

Ill! sure he is not.

RECHA

A cold shudder
Creeps over me; O Daya, feel my forehead,
It was so warm, 'tis now as chill as ice.

NATHAN

He is a Frank, unused to this hot climate,
Is young, and to the labours of his calling,
To fasting, watching, quite unused—

RECHA

Ill—ill!

DAYA

Thy father only means 'twere possible.

NATHAN

And there he lies, without a friend, or money
To buy him friends—

RECHA

Alas! my father.

NATHAN

Lies
Without advice, attendance, converse, pity,
The prey of agony, of death—

RECHA

Where—where?

NATHAN

He, who, for one he never knew, or saw—
It is enough for him he is a man—
Plunged into fire.

DAYA

O Nathan, Nathan, spare her.

NATHAN

Who cared not to know aught of her he saved,

Declined her presence to escape her thanks—

DAYA

Do, spare her!

NATHAN

Did not wish to see her more
Unless it were a second time to save her—
Enough for him he is a man—

DAYA

Stop, look!

NATHAN

He—he, in death, has nothing to console him,
But the remembrance of this deed.

DAYA

You kill her!

NATHAN

And you kill him—or might have done at least—
Recha 'tis medicine I give, not poison.
He lives—come to thyself—may not be ill—
Not even ill—

RECHA

Surely not dead, not dead.

NATHAN

Dead surely not—for God rewards the good
Done here below, here too. Go; but remember
How easier far devout enthusiasm is
Than a good action; and how willingly
Our indolence takes up with pious rapture,
Tho' at the time unconscious of its end,
Only to save the toil of useful deeds.

RECHA

Oh never leave again thy child alone!—
But can he not be only gone a journey?

NATHAN

Yes, very likely. There's a Mussulman
Numbering with curious eye my laden camels,
Do you know who he is?

DAYA

Oh, your old dervis.

NATHAN

Who—who?

DAYA

Your chess companion.

NATHAN

That, Al-Hafi?

DAYA

And now the treasurer of Saladin.

NATHAN

Al-Hafi? Are you dreaming? How was this?
In fact it is so. He seems coming hither.
In with you quick.—What now am I to hear?

Nathan *and* Hafi

HAFI

Aye, lift thine eyes in wonder.

NATHAN

Is it you?
A dervis so magnificent!—

HAFI

Why not?
Can nothing then be made out of a dervis?

NATHAN

Yes, surely; but I have been wont to think
A dervis, that's to say a thorough dervis,
Will allow nothing to be made of him.

HAFI

May-be 'tis true that I'm no thorough dervis;
But by the prophet, when we must—

NATHAN

Must, Hafi?
Needs must—belongs to no man: and a dervis—

HAFI

When he is much besought, and thinks it right,
A dervis must.

NATHAN

Well spoken, by our God!
Embrace me, man, you're still, I trust, my friend.

HAFI

Why not ask first what has been made of me?

NATHAN

Ask climbers to look back!

HAFI

And may I not
Have grown to such a creature in the state
That my old friendship is no longer welcome?

NATHAN

If you still bear your dervis-heart about you
I'll run the risk of that. Th' official robe

Is but your cloak.

HAFI

A cloak, that claims some honour.
What think'st thou? At a court of thine how great
Had been Al-Hafi?

NATHAN

Nothing but a dervis.
If more, perhaps—what shall I say—my cook.

HAFI

In order to unlearn my native trade.
Thy cook—why not thy butler too? The Sultan,
He knows me better, I'm his treasurer.

NATHAN

You, you?

HAFI

Mistake not—of the lesser purse—
His father manages the greater still—
The purser of his household.

NATHAN

That's not small.

HAFI

'Tis larger than thou think'st; for every beggar
Is of his household.

NATHAN

He's so much their foe—

HAFI

That he'd fain root them out—with food and raiment—
Tho' he turn beggar in the enterprize.

NATHAN

Bravo, I meant so.

HAFI

And he's almost such.
His treasury is every day, ere sun-set,

Poorer than empty; and how high so e'er
Flows in the morning tide, 'tis ebb by noon.

NATHAN

Because it circulates through such canals
As can be neither stopped, nor filled.

HAFI

Thou hast it.

NATHAN

I know it well.

HAFI

Nathan, 'tis woeful doing
When kings are vultures amid caresses:
But when they're caresses amid the vultures
'Tis ten times worse.

NATHAN

No, dervis, no, no, no.

HAFI

Thou mayst well talk so. Now then, let me hear
What wouldst thou give me to resign my office?

NATHAN

What does it bring you in?

HAFI

To me, not much;
But thee, it might indeed enrich: for when,
As often happens, money is at ebb,
Thou couldst unlock thy sluices, make advances,
And take in form of interest all thou wilt.

NATHAN

And interest upon interest of the interest—

HAFI

Certainly.

NATHAN

Till my capital becomes
All interest.

HAFI

How—that does not take with thee?
Then write a finis to our book of friendship;
For I have reckoned on thee.

NATHAN

How so, Hafi?

HAFI

That thou wouldst help me to go thro' my office
With credit, grant me open chest with thee—
Dost shake thy head?

NATHAN

Let's understand each other.
Here's a distinction to be made. To you,
To dervis Hafi, all I have is open;
But to the defterdar of Saladin,
To that Al-Hafi—

HAFI

Spoken like thyself!
Thou hast been ever no less kind than cautious.
The two Al-Hafis thou distinguishest
Shall soon be parted. See this coat of honour,
Which Saladin bestowed—before 'tis worn
To rags, and suited to a dervis' back,—
Will in Jerusalem hang upon the hook;
While I along the Ganges scorching strand,
Amid my teachers shall be wandering barefoot.

NATHAN

That's like you.

HAFI

Or be playing chess among them.

NATHAN

Your sovereign good.

HAFI

What dost thou think seduced me.
The wish of having not to beg in future—
The pride of acting the rich man to beggars—
Would these have metamorphosed a rich beggar

So suddenly into a poor rich man?

NATHAN

No, I think not.

HAFI

A sillier, sillier weakness,
For the first time my vanity was tempter,
Flattered by Saladin's good-hearted notion—

NATHAN

Which was?

HAFI

That all a beggar's wants are only
Known to a beggar: such alone can tell
How to relieve them usefully and wisely.
"Thy predecessor was too cold for me,
(He said) and when he gave, he gave unkindly;
Informed himself with too precautious strictness
Concerning the receiver, not content
To leant the want, unless he knew its cause,
And measuring out by that his niggard bounty.
Thou wilt not thus bestow. So harshly kind
Shall Saladin not seem in thee. Thou art not
Like the choked pipe, whence sullied and by spurts
Flow the pure waters it absorbs in silence.
Al-Hafi thinks and feels like me." So nicely
The fowler whistled, that at last the quail
Ran to his net. Cheated, and by a cheat—

NATHAN

Tush! dervis, gently.

HAFI

What! and is't not cheating,

Thus to oppress mankind by hundred thousands,
To squeeze, grind, plunder, butcher, and torment,
And act philanthropy to individuals?—
Not cheating—thus to ape from the Most High
The bounty, which alike on mead and desert,
Upon the just and the unrighteous, falls
In sunshine or in showers, and not possess
The never-empty hand of the Most High?—
Not cheating—

NATHAN

Cease!

HAFI

Of my own cheating sure
It is allowed to speak. Were it not cheating
To look for the fair side of these impostures,
In order, under colour of its fairness,
To gain advantage from them—ha?

NATHAN

Al-Hafi,
Go to your desert quickly. Among men
I fear you'll soon unlearn to be a man.

HAFI

And so do I—farewell.

NATHAN

What, so abruptly?
Stay, stay, Al-Hafi; has the desert wings?
Man, 'twill not run away, I warrant you—
Hear, hear, I want you—want to talk with you—
He's gone. I could have liked to question him
About our templar. He will likely know him.

Nathan *and* Daya

Daya (*bursting in*)

O Nathan, Nathan!

NATHAN

Well, what now?

DAYA

He's there.
He shows himself again.

NATHAN

Who, Daya, who?

DAYA

He! he!

NATHAN

When cannot He be seen? Indeed
Your He is only one; that should not be,
Were he an angel even.

DAYA

'Neath the palms
He wanders up and down, and gathers dates.

NATHAN

And eats?—and as a templar?

DAYA

How you tease us!
Her eager eye espied him long ago,
While he scarce gleamed between the further stems,
And follows him most punctually. Go,
She begs, conjures you, go without delay;
And from the window will make signs to you
Which way his rovings bend. Do, do make haste.

NATHAN

What! thus, as I alighted from my camel,
Would that be decent? Swift, do you accost him,
Tell him of my return. I do not doubt,
His delicacy in the master's absence
Forbore my house; but gladly will accept

The father's invitation. Say, I ask him,
Most heartily request him—

DAYA

All in vain!
In short, he will not visit any Jew.

NATHAN

Then do thy best endeavours to detain him,
Or with thine eyes to watch his further haunt,
Till I rejoin you. I shall not be long.

Scene.—A Place of Palms

The Templar walking to and fro, a Friar following him at some distance, as if desirous of addressing him.

TEMPLAR

This fellow does not follow me for pastime.
How skaunt he eyes his hands! Well, my good brother—
Perhaps I should say, father; ought I not?

FRIAR

No—brother—a lay-brother at your service.

TEMPLAR

Well, brother, then; if I myself had something—
But—but, by God, I've nothing.

FRIAR

Thanks the same;
And God reward your purpose thousand-fold!
The will, and not the deed, makes up the giver.
Nor was I sent to follow you for alms—

TEMPLAR

Sent then?

FRIAR

Yes, from the monastery.

TEMPLAR

Where

I was just now in hopes of coming in
For pilgrims' fare.

FRIAR

They were already at table:
But if it suit with you to turn directly—

TEMPLAR

Why so? 'Tis true, I have not tasted meat
This long time. What of that? The dates are ripe.

FRIAR

O with that fruit go cautiously to work.
Too much of it is hurtful, sours the humours,
Makes the blood melancholy.

TEMPLAR

And if I
Choose to be melancholy—For this warning
You were not sent to follow me, I ween.

FRIAR

Oh, no: I only was to ask about you,
And feel your pulse a little.

TEMPLAR

And you tell me
Of that yourself?

FRIAR

Why not?

TEMPLAR

A deep one! troth:
And has your cloister more such?

FRIAR

I can't say.
Obedience is our bounden duty.

TEMPLAR

So—
And you obey without much scrupulous questioning?

FRIAR

Were it obedience else, good sir?

TEMPLAR

How is it
The simple mind is ever in the right?
May you inform me who it is that wishes
To know more of me? 'Tis not you yourself,
I dare be sworn.

FRIAR

Would it become me, sir,
Or benefit me?

TEMPLAR

Whom can it become,
Whom can it benefit, to be so curious?

FRIAR

The patriarch, I presume—'twas he that sent me.

TEMPLAR

The patriarch? Knows he not my badge, the cross
Of red on the white mantle?

FRIAR

Can I say?

TEMPLAR

Well, brother, well! I am a templar, taken
Prisoner at Tebnin, whose exalted fortress,
Just as the truce expired, we sought to climb,
In order to push forward next to Sidon.
I was the twentieth captive, but the only
Pardoned by Saladin—with this, the patriarch
Knows all, or more than his occasions ask.

FRIAR

And yet no more than he already knows,
I think. But why alone of all the captives
Thou hast been spared, he fain would learn—

TEMPLAR

Can I
Myself tell that? Already, with bare neck,
I kneeled upon my mantle, and awaited

The blow—when Saladin with steadfast eye
Fixed me, sprang nearer to me, made a sign—
I was upraised, unbound, about to thank him—
And saw his eye in tears. Both stand in silence.
He goes. I stay. How all this hangs together,
Thy patriarch may unriddle.

FRIAR

He concludes,
That God preserved you for some mighty deed.

TEMPLAR

Some mighty deed? To save out of the fire
A Jewish girl—to usher curious pilgrims
About Mount Sinai—to—

FRIAR

The time may come—

And this is no such trifle—but perhaps
The patriarch meditates a weightier office.

TEMPLAR

Think you so, brother? Has he hinted aught?

FRIAR

Why, yes; I was to sift you out a little,
And hear if you were one to—

TEMPLAR

Well—to what?
I'm curious to observe how this man sifts.

FRIAR

The shortest way will be to tell you plainly
What are the patriarch's wishes.

TEMPLAR

And they are—

FRIAR

To send a letter by your hand.

TEMPLAR

By me?
I am no carrier. And were that an office
More meritorious than to save from burning

A Jewish maid?

FRIAR

So it should seem; must seem—
For, says the patriarch, to all Christendom
This letter is of import; and to bear it
Safe to its destination, says the patriarch,
God will reward with a peculiar crown
In heaven; and of this crown, the patriarch says,
No one is worthier than you—

TEMPLAR

Than I?

FRIAR

For none so able, and so fit to earn
This crown, the patriarch says, as you.

TEMPLAR

As I?

FRIAR

The patriarch here is free, can look about him,
And knows, he says, how cities may be stormed,
And how defended; knows, he says, the strengths
And weaknesses of Saladin's new bulwark,
And of the inner rampart last thrown up;
And to the warriors of the Lord, he says,
Could clearly point them out;—

TEMPLAR

And can I know
Exactly the contents of this same letter?

FRIAR

Why, that I don't pretend to vouch exactly—
'Tis to King Philip: and our patriarch—
I often wonder how this holy man,
Who lives so wholly to his God and heaven,
Can stoop to be so well informed about
Whatever passes here—'Tis a hard task!

TEMPLAR

Well—and your patriarch—

FRIAR

Knows, with great precision,
And from sure hands, how, when, and with what force,
And in which quarter, Saladin, in case
The war breaks out afresh, will take the field.

TEMPLAR

He knows that?

FRIAR

Yes; and would acquaint King Philip,
That he may better calculate, if really
The danger be so great as to require
Him to renew at all events the truce
So bravely broken by your body.

TEMPLAR

So?
This is a patriarch indeed! He wants
No common messenger; he wants a spy.
Go tell your patriarch, brother, I am not,
As far as you can sift, the man to suit him.
I still esteem myself a prisoner, and
A templar's only calling is to fight,

And not to ferret out intelligence.

FRIAR

That's much as I supposed, and, to speak plainly,
Not to be blamed. The best is yet behind.
The patriarch has made out the very fortress,
Its name, and strength, and site on Libanon,
Wherein the mighty sums are now concealed,
With which the prudent father of the sultan
Provides the cost of war, and pays the army.
He knows that Saladin, from time to time,
Goes to this fortress, through by-ways and passe
With few attendants.

TEMPLAR

Well—

FRIAR

How easy 'twere
To seize his person in these expeditions,
And make an end of all! You shudder, sir—
Two Maronites, who fear the Lord, have offer
To share the danger of the enterprise,
Under a proper leader.

TEMPLAR

And the patriarch
Had cast his eye on me for this brave office?

FRIAR

He thinks King Philip might from Ptolemais
Best second such a deed.

TEMPLAR

On me? on me?
Have you not heard then, just now heard, the favour

Which I received from Saladin?

FRIAR

Oh, yes!

TEMPLAR

And yet?

FRIAR

The patriarch thinks—that's mighty well—
God, and the order's interest—

TEMPLAR

Alter nothing,

Command no villainies.

FRIAR

No, that indeed not;
But what is villainy in human eyes
May in the sight of God, the patriarch think,
Not be—

TEMPLAR

I owe my life to Saladin,
And might take his?

FRIAR

That—fie! But Saladin,
The patriarch think, is yet the common foe
Of Christendom, and cannot earn a right
To be your friend.

TEMPLAR

My friend—because I will not
Behave like an ungrateful scoundrel to him.

FRIAR

Yet gratitude, the patriarch thinks, is not
A debt before the eye of God or man,
Unless for our own sakes the benefit
Had been conferred; and, it has been reported,
The patriarch understands that Saladin
Preserved your life merely because your voice,
Your air, or features, raised a recollection
Of his lost brother.

TEMPLAR

He knows this? and yet—
If it were sure, I should—ah, Saladin!
How! and shall nature then have formed in me

A single feature in thy brother's likeness,
With nothing in my soul to answer to it?
Or what does correspond shall I suppress
To please a patriarch? So thou dost not cheat us,
Nature—and so not contradict Thyself,
Kind God of all.—Go, brother, go away:
Do not stir up my anger.

FRIAR

I withdraw
More gladly than I came. We cloister-folk
Are forced to vow obedience to superiors.

[Goes.]

Templar *and* Daya

DAYA

The monk, methinks, left him in no good mood:
But I must risk my message.

TEMPLAR

Better still

The proverb says that monks and women are
The devil's clutches; and I'm tossed to-day
From one to th' other.

DAYA

Whom do I behold?—

Thank God! I see you, noble knight, once more.
Where have you lurked this long, long space? You've not
Been ill?

TEMPLAR

No.

DAYA

Well, then?

TEMPLAR

Yes.

DAYA

We've all been anxious
Lest something ailed you.

TEMPLAR

So?

DAYA

Have you been journeying?

TEMPLAR

Hit off!

DAYA

How long returned?

TEMPLAR

Since yesterday.

DAYA

Our Recha's father too is just returned,
And now may Recha hope at last—

TEMPLAR

For what?

DAYA

For what she often has requested of you.
Her father pressingly invites your visit.
He now arrives from Babylon, with twenty
High-laden camels, brings the curious drugs,
And precious stones, and stuffs, he has collected
From Syria, Persia, India, even China.

TEMPLAR

I am no chap.

DAYA

His nation honours him,
As if he were a prince, and yet to hear him
Called the *wise* Nathan by them, not the *rich*,
Has often made me wonder.

TEMPLAR

To his nation
Are *rich* and *wise* perhaps of equal import.

DAYA

But above all he should be called the *good*.
You can't imagine how much goodness dwells
Within him. Since he has been told the service
You rendered to his Recha, there is nothing
That he would grudge you.

TEMPLAR

Aye?

DAYA

Do—see him, try him.

TEMPLAR

A burst of feeling soon is at an end.

DAYA

And do you think that I, were he less kind,
Less bountiful, had housed with him so long:
That I don't feel my value as a Christian:
For 'twas not o'er my cradle said, or sung,
That I to Palestina should pursue
My husband's steps, only to educate
A Jewess. My husband was a noble page
In Emperor Frederic's army.

TEMPLAR

And by birth
A Switzer, who obtained the gracious honour
Of drowning in one river with his master.
Woman, how often you have told me this!
Will you ne'er leave off persecuting me?

DAYA

My Jesus! persecute—

TEMPLAR

Aye, persecute.

Observe then, I henceforward will not see,
Not hear you, nor be minded of a deed
Over and over, which I did unthinking,
And which, when thought about, I wonder at.
I wish not to repent it; but, remember,
Should the like accident occur again,
'Twill be your fault if I proceed more coolly,
Ask a few questions, and let burn what's burning.

DAYA

My God forbid!

TEMPLAR

From this day forth, good woman,

Do me at least the favour not to know me:
I beg it of you; and don't send the father.
A Jew's a Jew, and I am rude and bearish.
The image of the maid is quite erased
Out of my soul—if it was ever there—

DAYA

But yours remains with her.

TEMPLAR

Why so—what then—
Wherefore give harbour to it?—

DAYA

Who knows wherefore?
Men are not always what they seem to be.

TEMPLAR

They're seldom better than they seem to be.

DAYA

Ben't in this hurry.

TEMPLAR

Pray, forbear to make
These palm-trees odious. I have loved to walk here.

DAYA

Farewell then, bear. Yet I must track the savage.

ACT II

**Scene.—The Sultan's Palace.—An
outer room of Sittah's apartment**

Saladin and Sittah, playing chess

SITTAH

Wherefore so absent, brother? How you play!

SALADIN

Not well? I thought—

SITTAH

Yes; very well for me,
Take back that move.

SALADIN

Why?

SITTAH

Don't you see the knight
Becomes exposed?

SALADIN

'Tis true: then so.

SITTAH

And so
I take the pawn.

SALADIN

That's true again. Then, check!

SITTAH

That cannot help you. When my king is castled
All will be safe.

SALADIN

But out of my dilemma
'Tis not so easy to escape unhurt.

Well, you must have the knight.

SITTAH

I will not have him,
I pass him by.

SALADIN

In that, there's no forbearance:
The place is better than the piece.

SITTAH

Maybe.

SALADIN

Beware you reckon not without your host:
This stroke you did not think of.

SITTAH

No, indeed;
I did not think you tired of your queen.

SALADIN

My queen?

SITTAH

Well, well! I find that I to-day
Shall earn a thousand dinars to an asper.

SALADIN

How so, my sister?

SITTAH

Play the ignorant—
As if it were not purposely thou lovest.
I find not my account in 't; for, besides
That such a game yields very little pastime,
When have I not, by losing, won with thee?
When hast thou not, by way of comfort to me
For my lost game, presented twice the stake?

SALADIN

So that it may have been on purpose, sister,
That thou hast lost at times.

SITTAH

At least, my brother's
Great liberality may be one cause
Why I improve no faster.

SALADIN

We forget
The game before us: let us make an end of it.

SITTAH

I move—so—now then—check! and check again!

SALADIN

This countercheck I wasn't aware of, Sittah;

My queen must fall the sacrifice.

SITTAH

Let's see—
Could it be helped?

SALADIN

No, no, take off the queen!
That is a piece which never thrives with me.

SITTAH

Only that piece?

SALADIN

Off with it! I shan't miss it.
Thus I guard all again.

SITTAH

How civilly
We should behave to queens, my brother's lessons
Have taught me but too well.

SALADIN

Take her, or not,
I stir the piece no more.

SITTAH

Why should I take her?
Check!

SALADIN

Go on.

SITTAH

Check!—

SALADIN

And check-mate?

SITTAH

Hold! not yet.
You may advance the knight, and ward the danger,
Or as you will—it is all one.

SALADIN

It is so.
You are the winner, and Al-Hafi pays.
Let him be called. Sittah, you was not wrong;
I seem to recollect I was unmindful—
A little absent. One isn't always willing
To dwell upon some shapeless bits of wood
Coupled with no idea. Yet the Imam,
When I play with him, bends with such abstraction—
The loser seeks excuses. Sittah, 'twas not
The shapeless men, and the unmeaning squares,
That made me heedless—your dexterity,
Your calm sharp eye.

SITTAH

And what of that, good brother,
Is that to be th' excuse for your defeat?
Enough—you played more absently than I.

SALADIN

Than you! What dwells upon your mind, my Sittah?
Not your own cares, I doubt—

SITTAH

O Saladin,
When shall we play again so constantly?

SALADIN

An interruption will but whet our zeal.
You think of the campaign. Well, let it come.
It was not I who first unsheathed the sword.
I would have willingly prolonged the truce,
And willingly have knit a closer bond,
A lasting one—have given to my Sittah
A husband worthy of her, Richard's brother.

SITTAH

You love to talk of Richard.

SALADIN

Richard's sister
Might then have been allotted to our Melek.
O what a house that would have formed—the first—
The best—and what is more—of earth the happiest!
You know I am not loth to praise myself;
Why should I?—Of my friends am I not worthy?
O we had then led lives!

SITTAH

A pretty dream.
It makes me smile. You do not know the Christians.
You will not know them. 'Tis this people's pride
Not to be men, but to be Christians. Even
What of humane their Founder felt, and taught,

And left to savour their found superstition,
They value not because it is humane,
Lovely, and good for man; they only prize it
Because 'twas Christ who taught it, Christ who did it.
'Tis well for them He was so good a man:
Well that they take His goodness all for granted,
And in His virtues put their trust. His virtues—
'Tis not His virtues, but His name alone
They wish to thrust upon us—'Tis His name
Which they desire should overspread the world,
Should swallow up the name of all good men,
And put the best to shame. 'Tis His mere name
They care for—

SALADIN

Else, my Sittah, as thou sayst,
They would not have required that thou, and Melek,
Should be called Christians, ere you might be suffered
To feel for Christians conjugal affection.

SITTAH

As if from Christians only, and as Christians,

That love could be expected which our Maker
In man and woman for each other planted.

SALADIN

The Christians do believe such idle notions,
They well might fancy this: and yet thou errest.
The templars, not the Christians, are in fault.
'Tis not as Christians, but as templars, that
They thwart my purpose. They alone prevent it.
They will on no account evacuate Acca,
Which was to be the dower of Richard's sister,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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