

The King's Justice

By Lafcadio Hearn

Praise to the Creator of all, the secret of whose existence is unknown; who hath marked all His creatures with an imprints though there be no visible imprint of Himself; who is the Soul of the soul; who is hidden in that which is hidden! . . . Though the firmament open its myriad million eyes in the darkness, it may not behold Him. Yet does the Sun nightly bow his face of flame below the west, in worship; monthly the Moon faints away in astonishment at His greatness. . . . Eternally the Ocean lifts its thousand waves to proclaim his glory; Fire seeks to rise to Him; Winds whisper of His mystery. . . . And in the balance of His justice even a sigh hath weight. . . .

In the first recital of the First Book of the Gulistan, treating of the Conduct of Kings, it is said that a Persian monarch condemned with his own lips a prisoner of war, and commanded that he be put to death.

And the prisoner, being still in the force of youth and the fulness of strength, thought within his heart of all the days he might otherwise have lived, of all the beauty he might have caressed, of all the happiness he might have known, of all the hopes unbudded that might have ripened into blossom for him. Thus regretting, and seeing before him only the blind and moonless night of death, and considering that the fair sun would never rise for him again, he cursed the king in the language of malediction of his own country, loudly and with mad passion. For it is a proverb: "Whosoever washeth his hands of life, truly saith all that is within his heart."

Now the king, hearing the vehemence of the man, but nowise understanding the barbaric tongue which he spoke, questioned his first vizier, asking, "What saith the dog?"

But the vizier, being a kindly-hearted man, answered thus: "O Master, he repeateth the words of the Holy Book, the words of the Prophet of God concerning those who repress their anger and pardon injury, the beloved of Allah."

And the king, hearing and believing these words, felt his heart moved within him; the fire of his anger died out, and the spirit of pity entered into him, so that he revoked his own command and forgave the man, and ordered that he should be set free.

But there was another vizier also with the king, a malevolent and cunning-eyed man, knowing all languages, and ever seeking to obtain elevation by provoking the misfortune of others. This vizier, assuming therefore an austere face like to that of a praying dervish, loudly exclaimed: "Ill doth it become trusted ministers of a king, men of honorable place, such as we are, to utter in the presence of our master even so much as one syllable of untruth. Know, therefore, O Master, that the first vizier hath untruthfully interpreted the prisoner's words; for that wretch uttered no single pious word, but evil and blasphemous language concerning thee, cursing his king in the impotency of his rage."

But the king's brows darkened when he heard the words; and turning terrible eyes upon the second vizier, he said unto him: "More pleasant to my ears was the lie uttered by my first vizier, than the truth spoken by thy lips; for he indeed uttered a lie with a good and merciful purpose, whereas thou didst speak the truth for a wicked and malignant purpose. Better the lie told for righteous ends than the truth which provoketh evil! Neither shall my pardon be revoked; but as for thee, let me see thy face no more!"