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Select Tale.

THE RIVAL MINISTERS.

In one of the Mohammedan kingdoms of India, there was a sultan who had two ministers, one of whom he called his Vizier, and the other his Keeper of the Great Seal. Between these two statesmen there existed a feud, which originated in they knew not what, and was probably traceable to the natural dissimilarity of their characters. But their antipathy was not the less real, that it admitted of no satisfactory explanation. The principal aim of their whole lives appeared to be, not so much to serve their master, or even to advance their own interests, as to effect by any means, fair or foul, each other's ruin. To accomplish this they labored incessantly, though compelled by the duties of their situation to adopt, when in the presence, or even generally in the sight of the world, a friendly or at least a courteous manner.

It happened that the keeper of the seal possessed, on the banks of the river, a mansion of great magnificence, surrounded with gardens, in which were found ponds, fountains, and picturesque kiosks. Here the minister and his family, which was extremely numerous, enjoyed themselves in the cool of the evening, especially during that season of the year in which the nightingale delights to pour its thrilling music upon the breeze. They would then order fruits and sweetmeats and delicious sherbets to be brought forth, and prolong their simple pleasures sometimes till late in the night. When the ladies were absent, their place supplied by a young Persian secretary, whose studies were serious beyond his age; since he united to an extensive knowledge of business some familiarities with the doctrines of philosophers, the works of great poets, and the sayings of wise men. From his conversation, the keeper of the seal himself consented to derive not only amusement but instruction. This he was frank enough to acknowledge, so that by degrees the Persian secretary became necessary to him, and from a dependent was converted into an intimate associate and friend.

There was an extraordinary anomaly in the duties of the seal-keeper. He was to the sultan what we should call a chancellor of the exchequer, since he managed the finances, regulated receipts and expenditure, and whatever else appertained to that department. Besides this, it belonged to watch over the progress of trade and industry; so as at all times to be able to foresee what was likely to be the state of the treasury at any given time. As the prince was a man of sense and judgment, he set a proper value upon this minister, whose name was Abou Meidau.

Ibn Tarak, the vizier, was understood to exercise a superintendence over all his colleagues, and to be most thoroughly in the confidence of the monarch. But, as evil fortune would have it, he was crafty and malicious, full of envy towards all men, but more especially towards Abou Meidau, whom he would gladly have destroyed utterly, or, failing in this, would have reduced to the condition of a pike-bearer, or a slave, or a water-carrier in the streets. The house in which he dwelt stood at no great distance from that of his rival. As might have been expected, it was very spacious; but instead of standing in the midst of pleasant grounds, it looked on all sides into gloomy courts, where slaves were perpetually at work, ministering to the wants, real or imaginary, of their terrible master. The lofty walls re-echoed frequently to the sound of the lash, or the cries of some poor wretch under punishment. Otherwise, there was very little noise. The domestics walked to and fro in si-

lence, apprehensive lest by some unguarded word they might incur the displeasure of Ibn Tarak, who appeared to have ears everywhere, to overhear whatever was in any way calculated to excite his anger.

It will readily be supposed that Abou Meidau, thoroughly acquainted with the character of his enemy, did not sleep on a bed of roses. Every morning, when he repaired to the divan, he mentally girded up his loins, to combat with the fate which constantly menaced him. The sultan, though able and experienced, was still susceptible of being biased by false representations; and it was not unknown to Abou Meidau, that his rival's eloquence was fully equal to his wickedness, and that there was, consequently, no scheme too atrocious for him to form, or too monstrous for him to render probable. Again and again he had escaped narrowly from the snares laid for him by this redoubtable man. He had owed his safety, however, less to his own unimpeachable honesty than to the prince's quickness in recognizing it; but who could answer for the perpetual rectitude of the monarch's judgment, for his equability of temper, or even of his inclination to be just and equitable? Might not Ibn Tarak take advantage of some moment of ill humour, to direct against him the bolts of the royal displeasure, when it would perhaps be impossible for him to obtain time to make clear his innocence, so that his ruin might be consummated irrevocably?

In Ibn Tarak's service there was a man who performed the various offices of secretary, spy, and assassin, and seemed to derive all the happiness of his life from acts of villainy. He was, to all appearance, of no particular age; yet the flashing of his eyes, and the vigour of his frame, proved him to be still young. He flitted about the palace like a shadow; he pryed into every man's affairs. Some persons he ruined; others, he exposed to torture and death; and occasionally, it was believed, acted as their executioner. His presence excited terror wherever he went, because generally observed to be the forerunner of loss or misfortune.

This individual was one morning beheld by Hussein, the Persian secretary, passing rapidly along the wall of Abou Meidau's garden, to which he had obtained a clandestine entrance. Notwithstanding his disastrous character, the young man gave him chase, but to no purpose, for he effected his escape among the groves and thickets, without affording any clue to the means or manner of his exit. When this fact was communicated to Abou Meidau, he went instinctively to the casket containing the sultan's great seal, trembling violently all the while, as the loss of it, he knew, would cost him his life—this having been the penalty, from time immemorial, attached to such criminal negligence. Great, therefore, was his joy on unlocking the casket, to find the fearful bauble there. He now took fresh precautions; locked the casket in a strong cabinet, which was again secured by two keys, which he wore night and day at his girdle, together with that of the room in which it stood. Still, knowing the boldness and ingenuity of the vizier and his agent, he was very far from feeling secure, so that his days became embittered; and he would gladly, if he could, have effected his escape from the country, that he might live in peace even in the most humble situation that may be allotted him in some foreign land.

While in this state of mind, a letter was delivered to him by one of his slaves, who could give no account of the messenger that had brought it. But its contents proved a fresh cause of perturbation. The writer, in a most friendly tone, warned him to beware of his secretary Hussein, who, he said, had been seen in secret consultation with the in-

famous agent of Ibn Tarak. Their place of meeting was named, and some of the very words that had passed between them were repeated. The keeper of the seal, though full of wisdom and discrimination, felt a little staggered by this statement, though not corroborated by the signature of any name. He said to himself, however: "The young man has hitherto served me faithfully, and God is great. I will lay aside this letter, and trust myself in the hands of destiny. Verily, it is better to suffer death, than to live always in fear, and put no faith in any of the creatures of God."

He therefore determined to conceal this matter from Hussein, and to live with him, as before, on terms of the most intimate friendship and confidence. Nevertheless, doubts from time to time projected themselves into his mind respecting the prudence of this course. He fancied, too—though it might be no more than fancy—that his secretary was more frequently than usual moody and abstracted; that he had acquired a taste for meditation and lonely walks; that he loved to remain in the garden late at night, though always found within call when wanted.

One evening, while sitting with Hussein in a bower, discussing confidentially state matters of the deepest importance, he appeared to have forgotten the lapse of time, until the moonbeams, streaming in upon them, shewed clearly that it was night. Looking up suddenly, Abou Meidau observed the figure of a man gliding past, and was upon the point of uttering an exclamation, when Hussein, with apparent unconcern, requested his master's permission to walk forth into the garden for a brief space, saying that he would presently return. Suspicion now darted through Abou Meidau's mind like an arrow; he bade the young man go, but determined to follow and watch him. In the opening of a distant alley, he once more caught a glimpse of the figure he had seen before, and his heart sickened within him as he beheld Hussein, who believed himself to be unnoticed, hastening rapidly in that direction.

"Verily," exclaimed the keeper of the seal, "There is no strength or power but in God! We are all weak and frail; and it is time for me to be on my guard, even against him whom I had begun to love as a son."

Hussein was absent much longer than seemed necessary; and when he did return, he appeared to be in a state of great excitement. His manner was hurried, his thoughts distracted and confused, and his language so broken and abrupt, that his master became truly alarmed; yet he determined to preserve silence, since if treachery were designed, he knew not how to guard himself against it. Many and many had been the friends he had chosen for himself; but they had all disappointed him—some through weakness, some through idleness, some through vice. Hussein only had hitherto afforded him full satisfaction; and his intention was to admit him into his family, by bestowing on him the hand of his eldest daughter, and thus converting friendship into the closest relationship. To be betrayed by such a one would indeed be a bitter calamity. But why should he anticipate such misfortune? The circumstances which had given birth to his fears were perfectly explicable upon other grounds; and by the exercise of an ingenuity common to persons in extraordinary difficulties, he became once more partially persuaded of his secretary's innocence; yet he could not altogether emerge from the cloud of doubts and forebodings which had for some time been gathering around him. In his turn, therefore, he became taciturn, disturbed in his demeanour, almost peevish. With minds equally unhinged and distempered, both returned to the house.

When the minister of finance retired to his ha-

rem, his looks were so discomposed and gloomy, that his wife and daughters could not refrain from taking notice of them. They inquired, therefore, into the cause of his sorrow, and attempted by kindness to soothe and console him; but he said: "I am sick at heart. The wickedness of Ibn Tarak, and"—he was about to say the treachery of Hussein, but he checked the word on his lips and finished the sentence differently—"and the network of perfidy he has woven about me, disturb the serenity of my soul. Verily, I am weary of all things—the sun and the moon, and whatever else exists in the universe, except you, O my wife and children!"

"Nay, father," exclaimed Perizade, his eldest daughter, "but you surely except Hussein also?"

"Yes, yes," answered Abou Meidau; "you say right, for surely he is honest—surely, surely. It cannot be that he has been corrupted by the gold or promises of Ibn Tarak."

As he pronounced these words a fearful thought stung him like a serpent; and springing from the divan with most unbecoming haste and eagerness, he snatched up a lamp, and leaving his family in the greatest consternation, rushed out of the apartment. Withheld by the manners of their country, the ladies dared not follow him, but remained where they were, lost in terror and amazement. Abou Meidau himself, as he moved hurriedly along galleries and corridors, might be said to be in a state of agony. The axe of the executioner appeared to be descending on his neck. He had come to the full conviction that the great seal had been stolen; that the days of his life were fast drawing to a close; that before another revolution of the sun should be completed, his children would be fatherless, and his wife a widow. He felt at that moment the full horror of despotism. The lamp trembled in his hand—his heart beat violently—his temples burned—and before he had reached the fatal chamber he was as one in a raging fever. But when he had arrived at the door, he found it locked, precisely as he had left it, which a little calmed his perturbation. He entered, therefore, and turning round, fastened himself in, as if he dreaded the immediate employment of violence, and hastening to the cabinet, opened it with faltering hands. There lay the casket; but for a moment his courage failed him, so that he could not insert the key. At length, however, more dead than alive, he succeeded in unlocking it; and, behold, the seal was gone!

It would be impossible to describe the sensations, the fears, the anguish, that the unhappy statesman now experienced. None but those who have served an Oriental despot, can by the utmost force of imagination place himself in his dreadful situation. The powers of his mind appeared to be annihilated; and in a state of absolute stupor he sank upon the floor; but by degrees his self-command in some degree returned, and he arose and paced to and fro through the apartment, revolving various plans of escape. Some times he resolved to disguise himself, and while the darkness yet permitted, to effect his exit from the city, and fly to the mountains. Then came the recollection that he could not take along with him his wife and children; and though he knew there was nothing to fear for them, the idea of parting was more than he could endure. Then he thought of proceeding early in the morning to the divan, and throwing himself at the sultan's feet, to relate what had happened, and sue for mercy; but he remembered that the hateful Ibn Tarak would be there, to pervert the royal mind, and intercept his clemency. In fact, he could not doubt that the ferocious vizier would bring against him the darkest and most base accusations, to which the prince in his an-