

Simon, the Friend of Snakes

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Armenian

Advanced
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The King of the Snakes lives in the ruins of a big tower between Nineveh and Babylon, and rules all the snake tribe, both on land and sea. Once the King's son, who was viceroy of the province of Diarbekir, wrote a letter to his royal father, as follows:

“Long live the King! May Heaven bestow upon you life everlasting. Amen. Be it known to you that your daughter-in-law and grandchildren were sick last summer, and the doctors advised that they must have a change of climate and must go to Mount Ararat and bathe in its pure streams, and eat its fragrant flowers, and this will immediately heal them. Consequently I sent her and the children, with their attendants, to Mount Ararat. I also wrote letters to the provincial viceroys and princes to assist the Princess and her train during their sojourn in that district. But the Prince of Aderbadagan, after receiving my letter, instead of giving help to the traveling Princess, collected his troops and assaulted her and her train. The attendants of the Princess met them bravely, and there, at the foot of Mount Ararat, occurred a bloody battle, which would doubtless have resulted in the total defeat of the Princess' train, on account of the superior numbers of the enemy, if a human being, Simon the Shepherd, who was tending his flock in a neighboring field, had not come to the assistance of our fatigued combatants. He took his great club, and entering the ranks of the warriors, beat and killed and pursued the assaulting brigands of the Prince of Aderbadagan, and saved the life of your daughter-in-law, who thus came safely through this perilous journey. You see, my liege, that there is good even among men. I will punish the vile Prince of Aderbadagan for his wicked conduct; but it remains for you to reward the goodness of

this noble human being as you deem best, and oblige your affectionate son.”

The King of the Snakes, receiving this letter, took with him a vast quantity of gold and jewels, and went to his palace, in a ruined castle between Aleppo and Diarbekir. He posted his attendants on the highways to keep watch and inform him when Shepherd Simon should pass. The Shepherd was employed by dealers in live-stock, who did business with Damascus and Aleppo, and was now on his way to Aleppo. As soon as he approached the palace of the Snake King the watchers informed their sovereign, and in the twinkling of an eye the whole army of snakes stood near the highway and began to conjure. Simon the Shepherd felt a strange dizziness,—the heavens above and the earth below seemed to change. He stood there bewitched, while his companions drove away. Presently he opened his eyes, and lo! he was surrounded by innumerable snakes of all sizes and colors. Upon a golden throne was sitting a snake as thick as the body of an elephant, and upon his head there was a crown of costly jewels and diamonds. One of the snakes read a paper praising the goodness of the Shepherd, his natural fondness for the snake tribe, and his gallant defense of the weak and the wronged.

“Now, noble human being,” said the King, “here is gold for you, precious jewels and diamonds; take as much as you like; and in addition to these, if you have a desire in your heart tell it to me and I will cause it to be satisfied.”

Simon, after filling his shepherd’s bag and his pockets with gold and jewels, said:

“I wish to understand the language of all animals, reptiles and birds.”

“Let it be so,” said the King; “but the day on which you shall tell anything of what you have seen or heard, you shall die.”

The spell was removed, the snakes vanished, and Simon the Shepherd returned to his home near the foot of Mount Ararat. On the way he heard the animals talking, and lo! they knew all the secrets of men, and foretold events that would happen. Sometimes he laughed at what he heard, and sometimes he was terrified so that his hair stood erect upon his head. He entered his native village, and lo! all the dogs, cats, chickens, and even the long-legged storks were hallooing to one another and saying:

“Simon the Shepherd has come; his bag and pockets are full of gold and jewels.”

Simon came to his house and put his treasure before his wife who, being a very curious woman, instantly asked him where and how he obtained so much wealth.

“Enjoy it, but never ask,” answered Simon.

Simon heard his dog and chickens talking in regard to the secrets of his house. Some times he laughed and sometimes he was angry. His wife, noticing Simon’s strange conduct towards the animals, asked the reason. He refused to tell, but she begged and importuned him, weeping all the time. Finally he could resist her entreaties no longer, and he promised to tell her everything on the following day. That evening he heard the dog talking to the cock, which was leading the chickens to roost, chuckling and gurgling:

“Tell me, master rooster,” said the dog, “what is the use of your chuckling and gurgling, since our master has promised his wife to-morrow to tell her everything? He will die; people will come and kill you, shoot me, and plunder and ruin everything which belongs to our master.”

“Eh! the sooner it is ruined the better,” answered the rooster, contemptuously. “I have a family of forty wives, who are all obedient to me; if our master was as wise as he is rich, he would not pay attention to the vain inquisitiveness of his wife; he himself would not die, and no harm would befall us or his house. But now he deserves death.”

Hearing this, Simon was advised; he seized his great club, and stood before his wife, saying:

“Wife, you must stop trying to compel me to tell you the secret; be content with what you have; else, by Heaven, I will beat you to death!”

The woman, seeing the club brandished over her head, put an end to her inquiries, and thereafter they enjoyed a happy life.

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