

The Story of the Barber's Fifth

Brother

A 1001 Nights

Arabic

Advanced
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As long as our father lived, Alnaschar was very idle. Instead of working for his bread, he was not ashamed to ask for it every evening, and to support himself next day on what he had received the night before. When our father died, worn out by age, he only left seven hundred silver drachmas to be divided among us, which made one hundred for each son. Alnaschar, who had never possessed so much money in his life, was quite puzzled to know what to do with it. After reflecting upon the matter for some time he decided to lay it out on glasses, bottles, and things of that sort, which he would buy from a wholesale merchant. Having bought his stock he next proceeded to look out for a small shop in a good position, where he sat down at the open door, his wares being piled up in an uncovered basket in front of him, waiting for a customer among the passers-by.

In this attitude he remained seated, his eyes fixed on the basket, but his thoughts far away. Unknown to himself, he began to talk out loud, and a tailor, whose shop was next door to his, heard quite plainly what he was saying.

“This basket,” said Alnaschar to himself, “has cost me a hundred drachmas—all that I possess in the world. Now in selling the contents piece by piece I shall turn two hundred, and these hundreds I shall again lay out in glass, which will produce four hundred. By this means I shall in course of time make four thousand drachmas, which

will easily double themselves. When I have got ten thousand, I will give up the glass trade and become a jeweler, and devote all my time to trading in pearls, diamonds, and other precious stones. At last, having all the wealth that heart can desire, I will buy a beautiful country house, with horses and slaves, and then I will lead a merry life and entertain my friends. At my feasts I will send for musicians and dancers from the neighboring town to amuse my guests.

In spite of my riches I shall not, however, give up trade till I have amassed a capital of a hundred thousand drachmas, when, having become a man of much consideration, I shall request the hand of the grand-vizir's daughter, taking care to inform the worthy father that I have heard favorable reports of her beauty and wit, and that I will pay down on our wedding day 3 thousand gold pieces. Should the vizir refuse my proposal, which after all, is hardly to be expected, I will seize him by the beard and drag him to my house."

When I shall have married his daughter, I will give her ten of the best eunuchs that can be found for her service. Then I shall put on my most gorgeous robes, and mounted on a horse with a saddle of fine gold, and its trappings blazing with diamonds, followed by a train of slaves, I shall present myself at the house of the grand-vizir, the people casting down their eyes and bowing low as I pass along. At the foot of the grand-vizir's staircase I shall dismount, and while my servants stand in a row to right and left, I shall ascend the stairs, at the head of which the grand-vizir will be waiting to receive me. He will then embrace me as his son-in-law, and giving me his seat will place himself below me. This being done (as I have every reason to expect), two of my servants will enter, each bearing a purse containing a thousand pieces of gold. One of these I shall present to him saying, "Here are the thousand gold pieces that I offered for your daughter's hand, and here," I shall continue, holding out the second purse, "are another thousand to show you that I am a man who is better than his word." After hearing of such generosity the world will talk of nothing else.

I shall return home with the same pomp as I set out, and my wife will send an officer to compliment me on my visit to her father, and I shall confer on the officer the honour of a rich dress and a handsome gift. Should she send one to me I shall refuse it and dismiss the bearer. I shall never allow my wife to leave her rooms on any pretext whatever without my permission, and my visits to her will be marked by all the ceremony calculated to inspire respect. No establishment will be better ordered than mine, and I shall take care always to be dressed in a manner suitable to my position. In the evening, when we retire to our apartments, I shall sit in the place of honour, where I shall assume a grand demeanour and speak little, gazing straight before me, and when my wife, lovely as the full moon, stands humbly in front of my chair I shall pretend not to see her. Then her women

will say to me, "Respected lord and master, your wife and slave is before you waiting to be noticed. She is mortified that you never deign to look her way; she is tired of standing so long. Beg her, we pray you, to be seated." Of course I shall give no signs of even hearing this speech, which will vex them mightily. They will throw themselves at my feet with lamentations, and at length I will raise my head and throw a careless glance at her, then I shall go back to my former attitude. The women will think that I am displeased at my wife's dress and will lead her away to put on a finer one, and I on my side shall replace the one I am wearing with another yet more splendid. They will then return to the charge, but this time it will take much longer before they persuade me even to look at my wife. It is as well to begin on my wedding-day as I mean to go on for the rest of our lives.

The next day she will complain to her mother of the way she has been treated, which will fill my heart with joy. Her mother will come to seek me, and, kissing my hands with respect, will say, "My lord" (for she could not dare to risk my anger by using the familiar title of "son-in-law"), "My lord, do not, I implore you, refuse to look upon my daughter or to approach her. She only lives to please you, and loves you with all her soul." But I shall pay no more heed to my mother-in-law's words than I did to those of the women. Again she will beseech me to listen to her entreaties, throwing herself this time at my feet, but all to no purpose. Then, putting a glass of wine into my wife's hand, she will say to her, "There, present that to him yourself, he cannot have the cruelty to reject anything offered by so beautiful a hand," and my wife will take it and offer it to me trembling with tears in her eyes, but I shall look in the other direction. This will cause her to weep still more, and she will hold out the glass crying, "Adorable husband, never shall I cease my prayers till you have done me the favor to drink." Sick of her importunity, these words will goad me to fury. I shall dart an angry look at her and give her a sharp blow on the cheek, at the same time giving her a kick so violent that she will stagger across the room and fall on to the sofa.

"My brother," pursued the barber, "was so much absorbed in his dreams that he actually did give a kick with his foot, which unluckily hit the basket of glass. It fell into the street and was instantly broken into a thousand pieces."

His neighbor the tailor, who had been listening to his visions, broke into a loud fit of laughter as he saw this sight.

"Wretched man!" he cried, "You ought to die of shame at behaving so to a young wife who has done nothing to you. You must be a brute for her tears and prayers not to touch your heart. If I were the grand-vizir I would

order you a hundred blows from a bullock whip, and would have you led round the town accompanied by a herald who should proclaim your crimes.”

The accident, so fatal to all his profits, had restored my brother to his senses, and seeing that the mischief had been caused by his own insufferable pride, he rent his clothes and tore his hair, and lamented himself so loudly that the passers-by stopped to listen. It was a Friday, so these were more numerous than usual. Some pitied Alnaschar, others only laughed at him, but the vanity which had gone to his head had disappeared with his basket of glass, and he was loudly bewailing his folly when a lady, evidently a person of consideration, rode by on a mule. She stopped and inquired what was the matter, and why the man wept. They told her that he was a poor man who had laid out all his money on this basket of glass, which was now broken. On hearing the cause of these loud wails the lady turned to her attendant and said to him, “Give him whatever you have got with you.” The man obeyed, and placed in my brother’s hands a purse containing five hundred pieces of gold. Alnaschar almost died of joy on receiving it. He blessed the lady a thousand times, and, shutting up his shop where he had no longer anything to do, he returned home.

He was still absorbed in contemplating his good fortune, when a knock came to his door, and on opening it he found an old woman standing outside.

“My son,” she said, “I have a favour to ask of you. It is the hour of prayer and I have not yet washed myself. Let me, I beg you, enter your house, and give me water.”

My brother, although the old woman was a stranger to him, did not hesitate to do as she wished. He gave her a vessel of water and then went back to his place and his thoughts, and with his mind busy over his last adventure, he put his gold into a long and narrow purse, which he could easily carry in his belt. During this time the old woman was busy over her prayers, and when she had finished she came and prostrated herself twice before my brother, and then rising called down endless blessings on his head. Observing her shabby clothes, my brother thought that her gratitude was in reality a hint that he should give her some money to buy some new ones, so he held out two pieces of gold. The old woman started back in surprise as if she had received an insult. “Good heavens!” she exclaimed, “what is the meaning of this? Is it possible that you take me, my lord, for one of those miserable creatures who force their way into houses to beg for alms? Take back your money. I am thankful to say I do not need it, for I belong to a beautiful lady who is very rich and gives me everything I want.”

My brother was not clever enough to detect that the old woman had merely refused the two pieces of money he had offered her in order to get more, but he inquired if she could procure him the pleasure of seeing this lady.

“Willingly,” she replied; “and she will be charmed to marry you, and to make you the master of all her wealth. So pick up your money and follow me.”

Delighted at the thought that he had found so easily both a fortune and a beautiful wife, my brother asked no more questions, but concealing his purse, with the money the lady had given him, in the folds of his dress, he set out joyfully with his guide.

They walked for some distance till the old woman stopped at a large house, where she knocked. The door was opened by a young Greek slave, and the old woman led my brother across a well-paved court into a well-furnished hall. Here she left him to inform her mistress of his presence, and as the day was hot he flung himself on a pile of cushions and took off his heavy turban. In a few minutes there entered a lady, and my brother perceived at the first glance that she was even more beautiful and more richly dressed than he had expected. He rose from his seat, but the lady signed to him to sit down again and placed herself beside him.

After the usual compliments had passed between them she said, “We are not comfortable here, let us go into another room,” and passing into a smaller chamber, apparently communicating with no other, she continued to talk to him for some time. Then rising hastily she left him, saying, “Stay where you are, I will come back in a moment.”

He waited as he was told, but instead of the lady there entered a huge black slave with a sword in his hand. Approaching my brother with an angry countenance he exclaimed, “What business have you here?” His voice and manner were so terrific that Alnaschar had not strength to reply, and allowed his gold to be taken from him, and even sabre cuts to be inflicted on him without making any resistance. As soon as he was let go, he sank on the ground powerless to move, though he still had possession of his senses. Thinking he was dead, the black ordered the Greek slave to bring him some salt, and between them they rubbed it into his wounds, thus giving him acute agony, though he had the presence of mind to give no sign of life. They then left him, and their place was taken by the old woman, who dragged him to a trapdoor and threw him down into a vault filled with the bodies of murdered men.

At first the violence of his fall caused him to lose consciousness, but luckily the salt which had been rubbed into

his wounds had by its smarting preserved his life, and little by little he regained his strength. At the end of two days, he lifted the trapdoor during the night and hid himself in the courtyard till daybreak, when he saw the old woman leave the house in search of more prey. Luckily she did not observe him, and when she was out of sight, he stole from this nest of assassins and took refuge in my house.

I dressed his wounds and tended him carefully, and when a month had passed, he was as well as ever. His one thought was how to seek revenge on that wicked old hag, and for this purpose he had a purse made large enough to contain five hundred gold pieces, but filled it instead with bits of glass. This he tied round him with his sash, and, disguising himself as an old woman, he took a saber, which he hid under his dress.

One morning as he was hobbling through the streets he met his old enemy prowling to see if she could find anyone to decoy. He went up to her and, imitating the voice of a woman, he said, "Do you happen to have a pair of scales you could lend me? I have just come from Persia and have brought with me five hundred gold pieces, and I am anxious to see if they are the proper weight."

"Good woman," replied the old hag, "you could not have asked anyone better. My son is a money-changer, and if you will follow me he will weigh them for you himself. Only we must be quick or he will have gone to his shop." So saying she led the way to the same house as before, and the door was opened by the same Greek slave.

Again my brother was left in the hall, and the pretend son appeared under as the black slave. "Miserable crone," he said to my brother, "get up and come with me," and turned to lead the way to the place of murder. Alnaschar rose too, and drawing the sabre from under his dress dealt the black such a blow on his neck that his head was severed from his body. My brother picked up the head with one hand, and seizing the body with the other dragged it to the vault, when he threw it in and sent the head after it.

The Greek slave, supposing that all had passed as usual, shortly arrived with the basin of salt, but when she beheld Alnaschar with the saber in his hand, she let the basin fall and turned to run. My brother, however, was too quick for her, and in another instant her head was rolling from her shoulders. The noise brought the old woman running to see what was the matter, and he seized her before she had time to escape. "Wretch!" he cried, "do you know me?"

"Who are you, my lord?" she replied, trembling all over. "I have never seen you before."

“I am he whose house you entered to offer your hypocritical prayers. Don't you remember now?”

She flung herself on her knees to implore mercy, but he cut her in four pieces.

There remained only the lady, who was quite ignorant of all that was taking place around her. He sought her through the house, and when at last he found her, she nearly fainted with terror at the sight of him. She begged hard for life, which he was generous enough to give her, but he bade her to tell him how she had got into partnership with the abominable creatures he had just put to death.

“I was once,” replied she, “the wife of an honest merchant, and that old woman, whose wickedness I did not know, used occasionally to visit me. ‘Madam,’ she said to me one day, ‘we have a grand wedding at our house today. If you would do us the honor to be present, I am sure you would enjoy yourself.’ I allowed myself to be persuaded, put on my richest dress, and took a purse with a hundred pieces of gold. Once inside the doors, I was kept by force by that dreadful black, and it is now three years that I have been here, to my great grief.”

“That horrible black must have amassed great wealth,” remarked my brother.

“Such wealth,” returned she, “that if you succeed in carrying it all away, it will make you rich for ever. Come and let us see how much there is.”

She led Alnaschar into a chamber filled with coffers packed with gold, which he gazed at with an admiration he was powerless to conceal. “Go,” she said, “and bring men to carry them away.”

My brother did not wait to be told twice, and hurried out into the streets, where he soon collected ten men. They all came back to the house, but what was his surprise to find the door open, and the room with the chests of gold quite empty. The lady had been cleverer than himself, and had made the best use of her time. However, he tried to console himself by removing all the beautiful furniture, which more than made up for the five hundred gold pieces he had lost.

Unluckily, on leaving the house, he forgot to lock the door, and the neighbors, finding the place empty, informed the police, who next morning arrested Alnaschar as a thief. My brother tried to bribe them to let him off, but far from listening to him they tied his hands, and forced him to walk between them to the presence of the judge. When they had explained to the official the cause of complaint, he asked Alnaschar where he had obtained all the furniture that he had taken to his house the day before.

“Sir,” replied Alnaschar, “I am ready to tell you the whole story, but give, I pray you, your word, that I shall run no risk of punishment.”

“That I promise,” said the judge. So my brother began at the beginning and related all his adventures, and how he had avenged himself on those who had betrayed him. As to the furniture, he entreated the judge at least to allow him to keep part to make up for the five hundred pieces of gold which had been stolen from him.

The judge, however, would say nothing about this, and lost no time in sending men to fetch away all that Alnaschar had taken from the house. When everything had been moved and placed under his roof, he ordered my brother to leave the town and never more to enter it on peril of his life, fearing that if he returned he might seek justice from the Caliph. Alnaschar obeyed, and was on his way to a neighboring city when he fell in with a band of robbers, who stripped him of his clothes and left him naked by the roadside. Hearing of his plight, I hurried after him to console him for his misfortunes, and to dress him in my best robe. I then brought him back disguised, under cover of night, to my house, where I have since given him all the care I bestow on my other brothers.

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