

The Black Slave

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Portuguese

Advanced
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There was once a princess who had a black man slave.

“Princess,” said the black slave one day, “I know that you love the good Count of Yanno very much; but you cannot marry him, for he is already married. Why not, then, marry me?”

“I love, as you say, the Count of Yanno, and I know that he is married; but my father is a very powerful king, and he can render his marriage void. As for you,” continued the princess, “I would rather marry the lowest born man of my own race than a black man!”

“Remember, princess, for how many years I have been your true slave—how I used to look after you when you were a child. Did I not once save you from the fangs of a wolf?”

“You need not tell me,” answered the princess, “that you love me as slaves love their superiors; but should you ever speak again about marrying me, I will tell my royal father.”

“If you mention the love that slaves generally have to their owners, I will not contradict you; but I think that sometimes masters are more unworthy the love of their slaves than the slaves are entitled to the love of their masters,” said the slave.

“You belong to us by purchase or by inheritance,” continued the princess, “and we do not belong to you. The white man gains the love of the lady of his choice by deeds of arms; he bears on his lance the banner

embroidered by his lady-love, and, as a true knight, he makes verses in her honour.”

“Chivalry, as you understand it, is to me a fable; for if one of your pale-faced knights risk his life, it is on behalf of his family pride, although he may mention his lady-love’s name with his dying breath; but if a slave lay down his life for his master or mistress, it is only reckoned a part of his duty,” urged the slave.

“I command you not to speak to me again like this,” said the princess, “or I will have you severely punished.”

The poor slave was very sorrowful when he heard the princess, whom he loved so dearly, threaten to have him punished. “Death is the leveller of all ranks and of all races,” said he; “the dust of the dead white man and of the black man are alike; in death, the king is no more than the beggar. I will run away from this palace and seek refuge in the northern provinces, where, if the climate be colder, they say the hearts of the people are warmer.”

That very night did Mobarec—for that was the name of the slave—leave the palace of his lady-love, the beautiful banks of the Guadalquivir, and his favourite orange-groves. During the daytime he hid in the caves on the mountain-sides, and as soon as night set in he would continue his journey.

When he had been travelling like this for some weeks, and as he was making his way through a dark forest, he saw a brilliant light in the distance; and as he was very hungry, he hoped that it might be from some house where he might get food and rest. As he walked on he discovered that the light was not from a house, but that it was caused by a large bonfire, around which some men and women were seated.

Fearing that he might be in the neighbourhood of robbers, he took the precaution of approaching by hiding behind the trees; and when he got near enough to the group to see them plainly, he observed that close to the fire there was a very old woman standing with her arms over the fire, and holding a child which screamed as if it were being burned.

Mobarec thought that the child was going to be roasted, and did not know that what he saw was simply the act of disenchantment, which was being carried out by the wise woman of the village on a child born with the evil eye.

Approaching still nearer, he heard the crone mutter some words, which Mobarec imagined to be used in order to stifle the piteous cries of the child.

The crone suddenly commenced shrieking and jumping over the fire, while the men and women who surrounded her beat the air with big sticks, which is done when the evil one is supposed to be leaving the body of the child.

Just at this moment Mobarec happened to show himself from behind the tree, when he was immediately observed by the wise woman, who directed all eyes to him; and their horror can be easily imagined when it is said that Mobarec was the first black man who had ever visited the northern parts of Spain.

Mobarec, on perceiving that he was seen, thought he would smile, in order to show them that he was a friend; but this made him look all the more terrible by the glare of the fire, and, thinking that he was the evil one that had just left the body of the child, they first of all crossed themselves and then ran towards Mobarec with their bludgeons, who, without more ado, took to his feet and was soon lost in the darkness of the forest.

Having baffled his pursuers, Mobarec sat down to rest and to think over what he had seen.

“I suppose,” said he to himself, “that these people were trying to make a king by burning a white child until he became black, for I could see that they were not going to eat it. I have been told that in some parts they will only have black kings, and I am certainly in one of these parts.”

Musing over this idea for a long time, he at last fell asleep, and dreamt that he had arrived at a large city, where the people had crowded to meet him, and that he was placed on a magnificent throne, crowned king, and had married his dear princess.

Then he thought he was in a magnificent bed-chamber, and that the sheets of his bed were fringed with fine lace; but purposing to raise the richly embroidered clothes a little higher, as he felt cold, he placed his hands on some stinging nettles, which made him wake and look around.

The day was already commencing; the timid rabbit was lurking about the dew-spangled leaves; the linnets were hopping about from branch to branch, and the wheels of some market carts were heard creaking in the distance.

Mobarec got up, and looking at himself in the waters of a passing stream, he was surprised to see that he had a golden crown on his head. It was, however, but the morning sun shining through the thick foliage above him.

“I was a slave last night,” exclaimed Mobarec; “this morning I am a king.”

He noticed the direction from which the noise of the cart wheels proceeded, and hurrying thither, he soon came within sight of some people who were carrying their wares to market.

Mobarec gradually approached them, and, seeing him advance, they dropped their baskets, and would have run away if fear had not deprived them of the power to do so.

“Be not afraid,” said the black man, “for I am your king. Hitherto you have had to work for the rich, but now the rich shall work for you. There shall be no poverty in my kingdom, no hunger, and no sorrow. Bad husbands shall take the place of the asses at the mills, and quarrelsome wives shall have a borough to themselves. Go,” continued he, addressing the crowd, “and tell the inhabitants of the city that I am approaching.”

“Long live the king!” shouted his hearers. “Long live the good king who will free us from our quarrelsome wives!” exclaimed the men; “And who will send our cruel husbands to replace the asses at the mills!” shrieked the women. “Long live the king who will banish poverty!” cried all together.

Having given vent to their enthusiasm, they hurried off to the city, and the good news soon spread that a new king was coming, and that they would all be rich.

Then they prepared a richly caparisoned white mule, with tinkling bells round its neck and a cloth of gold on its back, for the black king’s use, and they went out in a body to meet him.

Having approached Mobarec, they prostrated themselves before him, and were at first very much afraid; but hearing him address the mule in a grand speech, they rose and listened.

“Sir,” said Mobarec to the mule, “I feel highly flattered by this ovation, and I confer on you here the post of

principal minister, which you richly deserve for the sagacity you have shown in preserving silence when all want to make themselves heard. You will see that the poor are provided for, and that they provide for the wants of their king and his chosen ministers, of which you are the chief. People," exclaimed Mobarec, "behold your king and his minister! And from this day forward let every man and woman in my kingdom strive to be as sure-footed, patient, and silent as this my minister."

It must be confessed that the people were somewhat surprised at the turn events had taken; but as, recently, they had had a most unjust chief minister, they contented themselves with the knowledge that his successor could not introduce any cruel measures.

With similar ideas occupying them, they retraced their way to the city, preceded by their black king and his chief minister.

Arrived at the palace, Mobarec entered and took his seat on the throne, his chief minister standing close to the lowest step. He then addressed the audience as follows—

"I make it known that the rich persons of this kingdom shall, if so required, give up their wealth to the poor, who will then become rich; but, as I would not that those who have hitherto been poor should forget their duty to their more unfortunate fellow-creatures, I declare that they shall have to contribute not only to the maintenance of the king, his ministers, and the state, but also to the requirements of those at whose expense they have themselves acquired riches. I also command that all disputes shall be submitted to the superior wisdom of my chief minister, without whose verbal consent it shall be treasonable to have recourse to blows; and I further require of my liege subjects that they engage in no war with neighbouring states without taking their wives to battle."

This speech was very much applauded, and the white mule, being unaccustomed to the surroundings, commenced braying so loudly that Mobarec got up from his throne and said—

"Listen to the voice of my minister; he bids you all be silent while you pay him homage."

Then one by one they passed before the mule, bowing to him; and when this ceremony was finished Mobarec informed them that all real kings were of his colour, but that he had resolved on marrying the daughter of Xisto, false king of Andalusia; and, therefore, he commanded twenty of his subjects to proceed to that

kingdom, and bring back with them the fair Princess Zeyn, which was the name of the princess he loved.

“If they ask you what I am like, say that you have never seen one like me, and that my wisdom is only approached by that of my chief minister,” said Mobarec.

At the end of a month the twenty men returned with the lovely princess, who, until her marriage-day, was lodged in another palace.

Great preparations were made for the occasion, excepting in one borough of the city, which was deserted, for it had been assigned to all quarrelsome wives.

The princess was naturally very anxious to see her future husband, but etiquette forbade her doing so. Often had she thought of her runaway slave and lover. Absence had made her fonder of him, and little by little he had grown less black to her imagination.

At last the wedding-day arrived. Mobarec, attended by all his court, proceeded to the princess’s palace, dressed in magnificent apparel, his strong black arms bare, but with splendid gold bracelets round them, and a belt of the same metal round his waist. His coat of mail was interwoven with threads of gold; but his heart required no gold to set it off, it was purity itself.

As soon as the princess saw him she recognized her former slave, and, hurrying to meet him, threw her arms round his neck, exclaiming—

“I am not worthy to marry so good a man; but if you will have me, I am yours.”

“Princess,” exclaimed Mobarec, “if I before was thy slave, I am none the less so now; for since the first man was created, beautiful woman has made all men captives. If I have aught to ask of thee now, ’tis that thy dominion over thy new subjects shall be as pleasant to them as it will be delightful to me.”

From so wise a king and good a queen the people derived great benefit; disputes never went beyond the ears of the chief minister, and, in the words of the immortal barber and poet of the city, “the kingdom flourished under the guidance of a mule; which proves that there are qualities in the irrational beings which even wisest ministers would do well to imitate.”

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