



The Shaving of Shagpat: An Arabian Entertainment (complete)

George Meredith

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Then she abated somewhat in her liveliness, and said to him, 'Know that the city thou seest is the city of Shagpat, the clothier, and there's no one living on the face of earth, nor a soul that requireth thy craft more than he. Go therefore thou, bold of heart, brisk, full of the sprightliness of the barber, and enter to him. Lo, thou'lt see him lolling in his shop-front to be admired of this people—marvelled at. Oh! no mistaking of Shagpat, and the mole might discern Shagpat among myriads of our kind; and enter thou to him gaily, as to perform a friendly office, one meriting thanks and congratulations, saying, "I will preserve thee the Identical!" Now he'll at first feign not to understand thee, dense of wit that he is! but mince not matters with him, perform well thy operation, and thou wilt come to great things. What say I? 'tis certain that when thou hast shaved Shagpat thou wilt have achieved the greatest of things, and be most noteworthy of thy race, thou, Shibli Bagarag, even thou! and thou wilt be Master of the Event, so named in anecdotes and histories and records, to all succeeding generations.' At her words the breast of Shibli Bagarag took in a great wind, and he hung his head a moment to ponder them; and he thought, 'There's provokingness in the speech of this old woman, and she's one that instigateth keenly. She called me by my name! Heard I that? 'Tis a mystery!' And he thought, 'Peradventure she is a Genie, one of an ill tribe, and she's luring me to my perdition in this city! How if that be so?' And again he thought, 'It cannot be! She's probably the Genie that presided over my birth, and promised me dower of great things through the mouths of the readers of planets.' Now, when Shibli Bagarag had so deliberated, he lifted his sight, and lo, the old woman was no longer before him! He stared, and rubbed his eyes, but she was clean gone. Then ran he to the knolls and eminences that were scattered about, to command a view, but she was nowhere visible. So he thought, 'Twas a dream!' and he was composing himself to despair upon the scant herbage of one of those knolls, when as he chanced to gaze down the city below, he saw there a commotion and a crowd of people flocking one way; he thought, 'Twas surely no dream? come not Genii, and go they not, in the fashion of that old woman? I'll even descend on yonder city, and try my tackle on Shagpat, inquiring for him, and if he is there, I shall know I have had to do with a potent spirit. Allah protect me!'

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