

## CHAPTER XXXII

### “THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT”

I HAVE spoken to you a great deal about the poetry of George Meredith, but I have not yet found an opportunity to tell you about his having written what I believe to be one of the greatest fables—certainly the greatest fable imagined during the nineteenth century. I imagine also that this fable will live, will even become a great classic,—after all his novels have been forgotten. For his novels, great as they are, deal almost entirely with contemporary pictures of highly complicated English and Italian aristocratic society. They picture the mental and moral fashions of a generation, and all such fashions quickly change. But the great fable pictures something which is, which has been, and which always will be in human nature; it touches the key of eternal things, just as his poetry does—perhaps even better; for some of his poetry is terribly obscure. Mr. Gosse has written a charming essay upon the fable of which I am going to speak to you; but neither Mr. Gosse nor anybody else has ever attempted to explain it. If the book is less well known, less widely appreciated than it deserves, the fact is partly owing to the want of critical interpretation. Even to Mr. Gosse the book makes its appeal chiefly as a unique piece of literary art. But how many people in conservative England either care for literary art in itself, or are capable of estimating it? So long as people think that such or such a book is only a fairy tale, they do not trouble themselves much to read it. But prove to them that the fairy tale is the emblem of a great moral fact, then it is different. The wonderful stories of Andersen owe their popularity as much to the fact that they teach moral fact, as to the fact that they please children.

Meredith's book was not written to please children; there is perhaps too much love-making in it for that. I do not even know whether it was written for a particular purpose; I am inclined to think that there was no particular purpose. Books written with a purpose generally fail. Great moral stories are stories that have been written for art's sake. Meredith took for model the manner of the Arabian story-tellers. The language, the comparisons, the poetry, the whole structure of his story is in the style of "The Arabian Nights." But as Mr. Gosse observes, "The Arabian Nights" seem to us cold and pale beside it. You cannot find in "The Arabian Nights" a single page to compare with certain pages of "The Shaving of Shagpat"; and this is all the more extraordinary because the English book is written in a tone of extravagant humour. You feel that the author is playing with the subject, as a juggler plays with half a dozen balls at the same time, never letting one of them fall. And yet he has done much better than the Orientals who took their subject seriously. Even the title, the names of places or of persons, are jokes,—though they look very much like Arabian or Persian names. "Shagpat" is only the abbreviation of "shaggy pate," "pate" being an old English word for head—so that the name means a very hairy and rough looking head. When you begin to see jokes of this kind even in the names, you may be inclined to think that the book is trifling. I thought so myself before reading it; but now that I have read it at least half a dozen times, and hope to read it many times more, I can assure you that it is one of the most delightful books ever written, and that it cannot fail to please you. With this introduction, I shall now begin to say something about the story itself, the fantastic plot of it.

Who is Shagpat? Shagpat is a clothing merchant and the favourite of a king. Shagpat wears his hair very long, contrary to the custom of Mohammedan countries, where all men shave their heads, with the exception of one tuft on the top of the head, by which tuft, after death, the true

believer is to be lifted up by angels, and carried into Paradise. Mohammedans are as careful about this tuft as the Chinese are careful about their queues. How comes it that in a Mohammedan city a true believer should thus wear his hair long? It is because in his head there has been planted one magical hair taken out of the head of a Djinn or Genie; and this hair, called the Identical, has the power to make all men worship the person on whose head it grows. Therefore it is that the king reverences this clothing merchant, and that all the people bow down before him. Also an order is given that all men in that country must wear their hair long in the same manner, and that no barbers are to be allowed to exercise their trade in any of the cities.

A barber, not knowing these regulations, — a barber of the name of Shibli Bagarag — comes to the principal city and actually proposes to shave Shagpat. He is at once seized by slaves, severely beaten, and banished from the city. But outside the city he meets a horrible old woman, so ugly that it pains him to look at her; and she tells him that she can make his fortune for him if he will promise to marry her. Although he is in a very unhappy condition, the idea of marrying so hideous a woman terrifies him; nevertheless he plucks up courage and promises. She asks him then to kiss her. He has to shut his eyes before he can do that, but after he has done it she suddenly becomes young and handsome. She is the daughter of the chief minister of the king, and she is ugly only because of an enchantment cast upon her. This enchantment has been caused by the power of Shagpat, who desired to marry her. For her own sake and for the sake of the country and for the sake of all the people, she says that it is necessary that the head of Shagpat should be shaved. But to shave Shagpat requires extraordinary powers — magical powers. For the magical hair in that man's head cannot be cut by any ordinary instrument. If approached with a knife or a razor, this hair suddenly develops tremendous power as of

an electric shock, hurling far away all who approach it. It is only a hair to all appearances at ordinary times, but at extraordinary times it becomes luminous, and stands up like a pillar of fire reaching to the stars. And the daughter of the minister tells Bagarag that if he has courage she can teach him the magic that shall help him to cut that hair,—to shave the shaggy pate of Shagpat.

I have gone into details this far only to give you a general idea of the plan of the story. The greater part of the book deals with the obstacles and dangers of Shagpat, and recounts, in the most wonderful way, the struggle between the powers of magic used on both sides. For Shagpat is defended against barbers by evil spirits who use black magic; while Bagarag is assisted by his wife, and her knowledge of white magic. In his embraces she has become the most beautiful woman in the world, and the more he loves her the more beautiful she becomes. But he is given to understand that he must lose her if his courage fails in the fight against Shagpat. To tell you here how his courage is tested, and how he triumphs over all tests, would only spoil your pleasure in the story when you come to read it. Here I shall only say that the grandest chapter in the part of the book recounting Bagarag’s adventures is the chapter on the Sword of Aklis, the magical sword with which the head of Shagpat at last is shaved. The imagining of this sword is one of the most wonderful things in any literature; for all the ancient descriptions of magical swords are dull and uninteresting compared with the description of the sword of Aklis. It can only be looked at by very strong eyes, so bright it is; it can be used as a bridge from earth to sky; it can be made so long that in order to use it one must look through a telescope; it can be made lighter than a moon beam, or so heavy that no strength could lift it. I want to quote to you a few sentences of the description of the sword, because this description is very beautiful, and it will give you a good idea of Meredith’s coloured prose style. The passages which I am going to read describe the first

appearance of the sword to Bagarag, after he has washed his eyes with magical water :

His sight was strengthened to mark the glory of the Sword, where it hung in slings, a little way from the wall, outshining the lights of the cave, and throwing them back with its superior force and steadfastness of lustre. Lo! the length of it was as the length of crimson across the sea when the sun is sideways on the wave, and it seemed full a mile long, the whole blade sheening like an arrested lightning from the end to the hilt; the hilt two large live serpents twined together, with eyes like sombre jewels, and sparkling spotted skins, points of fire in their folds, and reflections of the emerald and topaz and ruby stones, studded in the blood-stained haft. Then, the seven young men, sons of Aklis, said to Shibli Bagarag, "Surrender the Lily!" And when he had given into their hands the Lily, they said, "Grasp the handle of the Sword!"

Now, he beheld the Sword and the ripples of violet heat that were breathing down it, and those two venomous serpents twined together, and the size of it, its ponderousness; and to essay lifting it appeared to him a madness, but he concealed his thought, and, setting his soul on the safety of Noorna, went forward to it boldly, and piercing his right arm between the twists of the serpents, grasped the jewelled haft. Surely, the Sword moved from the slings as if a giant had swayed it! But what amazed him was the marvel of the blade, for its sharpness was such that nothing stood in its way, and it slipped through everything as we pass through still water,—the stone columns, blocks of granite by the walls, the walls of earth, and the thick solidity of the ground beneath his feet. They bade him say to the Sword, "Sleep!" and it was no longer than a knife in the girdle. Likewise, they bade him hiss on the heads of the serpents, and say, "Wake!" and while he held it lengthwise it shot lengthening out.\*

In fact, it lengthens across the world, if the owner so desires, to kill an enemy thousands of miles away. With this wonderful sword at last Shagpat is shaved. But notwithstanding the power of thousands of good spirits who help the work, and the white magic of the beautiful Noorna, the shaving is an awfully difficult thing to do. The chapter describing it† reads as magnificently as the description of

\* *The Shaving of Shagpat*, "The Sword of Aklis."

† *Ibid.*, "The Flashes of the Blade."

the Judgment Day, and you will wonder at the splendour of it.

What does all this mean, you may well ask. What is the magical hair? What is the sword? What is every impossible thing recounted in this romance? Really the author himself gives us the clue, and therefore his meaning ought to have been long ago clearly perceived. At the end of the story is this clue, furnished by the words—

The Sons of Aklis were now released from the toil of sharpening of the Sword a half-cycle of years, to wander in delight on the fair surface of the flowery earth, breathing its roses, wooing its brides; for the mastery of an Event lasteth among men the space of one cycle of years, and after that a fresh Illusion springeth to befool mankind, and the seven must expend the concluding half-cycle in preparing the edge of the Sword for a new mastery.\*

From this it is quite evident to anybody who has read the book that the sword of Aklis is the sword of science,—the power of exact scientific knowledge, wielded against error, superstition, humbug, and convention of every injurious kind.

Do not, however, imagine that this bit of interpretation interprets all the story; you must read it more than once, and think about it a great deal, in order to perceive the application of its thousand incidents to real human nature.

When Bagarag first, in his ignorance, offers to shave Shagpat, he has no idea whatever of the powers arrayed against him. What he wants is not at all in itself wrong; on the contrary it is in itself quite right. But what is quite right in one set of social conditions may seem to be quite wrong in another. Therefore the poor fellow is astonished to discover that the whole nation is against him, that the king is particularly offended with him, that all public opinion condemns him, would refuse him even the right to live in its midst. Is not Bagarag really the discoverer, the scientific man, the philosopher with a great desire to benefit other men, discovering that his kind wish arouses against him the

\* *Ibid.*, “Conclusion.”

laws of the government, the anger of religions, and all the prejudice of public opinion? Bagarag is the reformer who is not allowed to reform anything,—threatened with death if he persists. Reformers must be men of courage, and Bagarag has courage. But courage is not enough to sustain the purpose of the philosopher, the reformer, the man with new ethical or other truth to tell mankind. Much more than courage is wanted—power. How is power to come? You remember about the horrible old woman who asks Bagarag to kiss her, and when he kisses her she becomes young and divinely beautiful. We may suppose that Noorna really represents Science. Scientific study seems very ugly, very difficult, very repellent at first sight, but if you have the courage and the capacity to master it, if you can bravely kiss it, as Bagarag kissed the old woman, it becomes the most delightful mistress; nor is that all—it finds strange powers and forces for you. It can find for you even a sword of Aklis.

Now certain subjects are supposed to be beneath the dignity of literary art; and some of the subjects in this extraordinary book might appear to you too trivial for genius to busy itself with. The use of a barber as hero is not at all inartistic; it is in strict accordance with the methods of the Arabian story-tellers to make barbers, fishermen, water-carriers, and other men of humble occupations, the leading characters in a tale. But that the whole plot of the narrative should turn upon the difficulty of cutting one hair; and that this single hair should be given so great an importance in the history—this might very well seem to you beneath the dignity of art—that is, until you read the book. Yet the manner in which the fancy is worked out thoroughly excuses such triviality. The symbol of the hair is excellent. What is of less seeming importance than a hair? What is so frail and light and worthless as a hair? Now to many reformers and teachers the errors, social, moral, or religious, which they wish to destroy really appear to have less value, less resistance than a hair. But, as a

great scientific teacher observed a few years ago, no man is able to conceive the strength in error, the force of error, the power of prejudice, until he has tried to attack it. Then all at once the illusion, the lie, that seems frail as a hair, and even of less worth, suddenly reveals itself as a terrible thing, reaching from Earth to Sky, radiating electricity and lightning in every direction. Observe in the course of modern European history what an enormous effort has been required to destroy even very evident errors, injustices, or illusions. Think of the hundreds of years of sturdy endeavour which we needed before even a partial degree of religious freedom could be obtained. Think of the astonishing fact that one hundred years ago the man risked his life who found the courage to say that witchcraft was an illusion. One might mention thousands of illustrations of the same truth. No intellectual progress can be effected within conservative countries by mere discovery, mere revelation of facts, nor by logic, nor by eloquence, nor even by individual courage. The discovery is ridiculed; the facts are denied; the logic is attacked; the eloquence is met by greater eloquence on the side of untruth; the individual courage is astounded, if not defeated, by the armies of the enemies summoned against it. Progress, educational or otherwise, means hard fighting, not for one lifetime only but for generations. You are well aware how many generations have elapsed since the educational system of the Middle Ages was acknowledged by all men of real intelligence as inadequate to produce great results. One would have thought that the mediæval fetish would have been thrown away in the nineteenth century, at least. But it is positively true that in most English speaking universities, even at the present time, a great deal of the machinery of mediæval education remains, and there is scarcely any hope of having it removed even within another hundred years. If you asked the wise men of those universities what is the use of preserving certain forms of study and certain formalities of practice that can only serve to increase the

obstacles to educational progress, they would answer you truthfully that it is of no use at all, but they would also tell you something about the difficulty that would attend any attempted change; and you would be astonished to learn the extent and the immensity of those difficulties.

Now you will perceive that the single hair in our study actually represents, perhaps, better than any more important object could do, the real story of any social illusion, any great popular error. The error seems so utterly absurd that you cannot understand how any man in his senses can believe it, and yet men quite as intelligent as yourselves, perhaps even more so, speak of it with respect. They speak of it with respect simply because they perceive better than you do what enormous power would be needed to destroy it. It appears to you something so light that even a breath would blow it away for ever, or the touch of pain break it so easily that the breaking could not even be felt. You think of wisdom crushing it as an elephant might crush a fly, without knowing that the fly was there. But when you come to put forth your strength against this error, this gossamer of illusion, you will find that you might as well try to move a mountain with your hand. You must have help: you must have friends to furnish you with the sword of Aklis. Even with that mighty sword the cutting of the hair will prove no easy job.

Afterwards what happens? Why, exactly the same thing that happens before. Men think that because the world has made one step forward in their time, all illusions are presently going to fade away. This is the greatest of social mistakes that a human being can possibly make. The great sea of error immediately closes again behind the forms that find strength to break out of it. It is just the same as before. One illusion may indeed be eventually destroyed, but another illusion quickly forms behind it. The real truth is that wisdom will be reached when human individuals as well as human society shall have become infinitely more perfect than they now are; and such perfection can scarce-

ly be brought about before another million of years at least.

These are the main truths symbolized in this wonderful story. But while you are reading “The Shaving of Shagpat,” you need not consider the moral meanings at all. You will think of them better after the reading. Indeed, I imagine that the story will so interest you that you will not be able to think of anything else until you have reached the end of it. Then you find yourself sorry that it is not just a little bit longer.