

"Yes," said Isaacs, "you are naturally surprised at my little Eldorado, so snugly hidden away in the lower story of a commonplace hotel. Perhaps you are surprised at finding me here, too. But come out into the air, your hookah is blazing, and so are the stars."

I followed him into the verandah, where the long cane chairs of the country were placed, and taking the tube of the pipe from the solemn Mussulman whose duty it was to prepare it, I stretched myself out in that indolent lazy peace which is only to be enjoyed in tropical countries. Silent and for the nonce perfectly happy, I slowly inhaled the fragrant vapour of tobacco and aromatic herbs and honey with which the hookah is filled. No sound save the monotonous bubbling and chuckling of the smoke through the water, or the gentle rustle of the leaves on the huge rhododendron-tree which reared its dusky branches to the night in the middle of the lawn. There was no moon, though the stars were bright and clear, the foaming path of the milky way stretching overhead like the wake of some great heavenly ship; a soft mellow lustre from the lamps in Isaacs' room threw a golden stain half across the verandah, and the chafing dish within, as the light breeze fanned the coals, sent out a little cloud of perfume which mingled pleasantly with the odour of the *chil-lum* in the pipe. The turbaned servant squatted on the edge of the steps at a little distance, peering into the dusk, as Indians will do for hours together. Isaacs

lay quite still in his chair, his hands above his head, the light through the open door just falling on the jewelled mouthpiece of his narghyle. He sighed—a sigh only half regretful, half contented, and seemed about to speak, but the spirit did not move him, and the profound silence continued. For my part, I was so much absorbed in my reflections on the things I had seen that I had nothing to say, and the strange personality of the man made me wish to let him begin upon his own subject, if perchance I might gain some insight into his mind and mode of thought. There are times when silence seems to be sacred, even unaccountably so. A feeling is in us that to speak would be almost a sacrilege, though we are unable to account in any way for the pause. At such moments every one seems instinctively to feel the same influence, and the first person who breaks the spell either experiences a sensation of awkwardness, and says something very foolish, or, conscious of the odds against him, delivers himself of a sentiment of ponderous severity and sententiousness. As I smoked, watching the great flaming bowl of the water pipe, a little coal, forced up by the expansion of the heat, toppled over the edge and fell tinkling on the metal foot below. The quick ear of the servant on the steps caught the sound, and he rose and came forward to trim the fire. Though he did not speak, his act was a diversion. The spell was broken.

"The Germans," said Isaacs, "say that an angel is passing over the house. I do not believe it."

I was surprised at the remark. It did not seem quite natural for Mr. Isaacs to begin talking about the Germans, and from the tone of his voice I could almost have fancied he thought the proverb was held as an article of faith by the Teutonic races in general.

"I do not believe it," he repeated reflectively. "There is no such thing as an angel 'passing'; it is a misuse of terms. If there are such things as angels, their changes of place cannot be described as motion, seeing that from the very nature of things such changes must be instantaneous, not involving time as a necessary element. Have you ever thought much about angels? By-the-bye, pardon my abruptness, but as there is no one to introduce us, what is your name?"

"My name is Griggs — Paul Griggs. I am an American, but was born in Italy. I know your name is Isaacs; but, frankly, I do not comprehend how you came by the appellation, for I do not believe you are either English, American, or Jewish of origin."

"Quite right," he replied, "I am neither Yankee, Jew, nor beef-eater; in fact, I am not a European at all. And since you probably would not guess my nationality, I will tell you that I am a Persian, a pure Iranian, a degenerate descendant of Zoroaster, as you call him, though by religion I follow the prophet, whose name be blessed," he added, with an expression of face I did not then understand. "I call myself Isaacs for convenience in business. There is

no concealment about it, as many know my story; but it has an attractive Semitic twang that suits my occupation, and is simpler and shorter for Englishmen to write than Abdul Hafizben-Isâk, which is my lawful name."

"Since you lay sufficient store by your business to have been willing to change your name, may I inquire what your business is? It seems to be a lucrative one, to judge by the accumulations of wealth you have allowed me a glimpse of."

"Yes. Wealth is my occupation. I am a dealer in precious stones and similar objects of value. Some day I will show you my diamonds; they are worth seeing."

It is no uncommon thing to meet in India men of all Asiatic nationalities buying and selling stones of worth, and enriching themselves in the business. I supposed he had come with a caravan by way of Baghdad, and had settled. But again, his perfect command of English, as pure as though he had been educated at Eton and Oxford, his extremely careful, though quiet, English dress, and especially his polished manners, argued a longer residence in the European civilisation of his adopted home than agreed with his young looks, supposing him to have come to India at sixteen or seventeen. A pardonable curiosity led me to remark this.

"You must have come here very young," I said. "A thoroughbred Persian does not learn to speak English like a university man, and to quote German

proverbs, in a residence of a few years; unless, indeed, he possess the secret by which the initiated absorb knowledge without effort, and assimilate it without the laborious process of intellectual digestion."

"I am older than I look — considerably. I have been in India twelve years, and with a natural talent for languages, stimulated by constant intercourse with Englishmen who know their own speech well, I have succeeded, as you say, in acquiring a certain fluency and mastery of accent. I have had an adventurous life enough. I see no reason why I should not tell you something of it, especially as you are not English, and can therefore hear me with an unprejudiced ear. But, really, do you care for a yarn?"

I begged him to proceed, and I beckoned the servant to arrange our pipes, that we might not be disturbed. When this was done, Isaacs began.

"I am going to try and make a long story short. We Persians like to listen to long stories, as we like to sit and look on at a wedding nautch. But we are radically averse to dancing or telling long tales ourselves, so I shall condense as much as possible. I was born in Persia, of Persian parents, as I told you, but I will not burden your memory with names you are not familiar with. My father was a merchant in prosperous circumstances, and a man of no mean learning in Arabic and Persian literature. I soon showed a strong taste for books, and every opportu-

nity was given me for pursuing my inclinations in this respect. At the early age of twelve I was kidnapped by a party of slave-dealers, and carried off into Roum — Turkey you call it. I will not dwell upon my tears and indignation. We travelled rapidly, and my captors treated me well, as they invariably do their prizes, well knowing how much of the value of a slave depends on his plump and sleek condition when brought to market. In Istamboul I was soon disposed of, my fair skin and accomplishments as a writer and a singer of Persian songs fetching a high price.

"It is no uncommon thing for boys to be stolen and sold in this way. A rich pacha will pay almost anything. The fate of such slaves is not generally a happy one." Isaacs paused a moment, and drew in two or three long breaths of smoke. "Do you see that bright star in the south?" he said, pointing with his long jewel-set mouthpiece.

"Yes. It must be Sirius."

"That is my star. Do you believe in the agency of the stars in human affairs? Of course you do not; you are a European: how should you? But to proceed. The stars, or the fates or Kāli, or whatever you like to term your kismet, your portion of good and evil, allotted me a somewhat happier existence than generally falls to the share of young slaves in Roum. I was bought by an old man of great wealth and of still greater learning, who was so taken with my proficiency in Arabic and in writing that he

resolved to make of me a pupil instead of a servant to carry his coffee and pipe, or a slave to bear the heavier burden of his vices. Nothing better could have happened to me. I was installed in his house and treated with exemplary kindness, though he kept me rigorously at work with my books. I need not tell you that with such a master I made fair progress, and that at the age of twenty-one I was, for a Turk, a young man of remarkably good education. Then my master died suddenly, and I was thrown into great distress. I was of course nothing but a slave, and liable to be sold at any time. I escaped. Active and enduring, though never possessing any vast muscular strength, I bore with ease the hardships of a long journey on foot with little food and scant lodging. Falling in with a band of pilgrims, I recognised the wisdom of joining them on their march to Mecca. I was, of course, a sound Mohammedan, as I am to this day, and my knowledge of the Koran soon gained me some reputation in the caravan. I was considered a creditable addition, and altogether an eligible pilgrim. My exceptional physique protected me from the disease and exhaustion of which not a few of our number died by the wayside, and the other pilgrims, in consideration of my youth and piety, gave me willingly the few handfuls of rice and dates that I needed to support life and strength.

“You have read about Mecca; and your *hadji* barber, who of course has been there, has doubtless

related his experiences to you scores of times in the plains, as he does everywhere. As you may imagine, I had no intention of returning towards Roum with my companions. When I had fulfilled all the observances required, I made my way to Yeddah and shipped on board an Arabian craft, touching at Mocha, and bearing coffee to Bombay. I had to work my passage, and as I had no experience of the sea, save in the caïques of the Golden Horn, you will readily conceive that the captain of the vessel had plenty of fault to find. But my agility and quick comprehension stood me in good stead, and in a few days I had learned enough to haul on a rope or to reef the great latteen sails as well as any of them. The knowledge that I was just returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca obtained for me also a certain respect among the crew. It makes very little difference what the trade, business, or branch of learning; in mechanical labour, or intellectual effort, the educated man is always superior to the common labourer. One who is in the habit of applying his powers in the right way will carry his system into any occupation, and it will help him as much to handle a rope as to write a poem.

“At last we landed in Bombay. I was in a wretched condition. What little clothes I had had were in tatters; hard work and little food had made me even thinner than my youthful age and slight frame tolerated. I had in all about three pence money in small copper coins, carefully hoarded

against a rainy day. I could not speak a word of the Indian dialects, still less of English, and I knew no one save the crew of the vessel I had come in, as poor as I, but saved from starvation by the slender pittance allowed them on land. I wandered about all day through the bazaars, occasionally speaking to some solemn looking old shopkeeper or long-bearded Mussulman, who, I hoped, might understand a little Arabic. But not one did I find. At evening I bathed in the tank of a temple full from the recent rains, and I lay down supperless to sleep on the steps of the great mosque. As I lay on the hard stones I looked up to my star, and took comfort, and slept. That night a dream came to me. I thought I was still awake and lying on the steps, watching the wondrous ruler of my fate. And as I looked he glided down from his starry throne with an easy swinging motion, like a soap-bubble settling to the earth. And the star came and poised among the branches of the palm-tree over the tank, opalescent, unearthly, heart shaking. His face was as the face of the prophet, whose name be blessed, and his limbs were as the limbs of the Hameshaspenthos of old. Garments he had none, being of heavenly birth, but he was clothed with light as with a garment, and the crest of his silver hair was to him a crown of glory. And he spoke with the tongues of a thousand lutes, sweet strong tones, that rose and fell on the night air as the song of a lover beneath the lattice of his mistress, the song of the mighty star wooing the

beautiful sleeping earth. And then he looked on me and said: 'Abdul Hafiz, be of good cheer. I am with thee and will not forsake thee, even to the day when thou shalt pass over the burning bridge of death. Thou shalt touch the diamond of the rivers and the pearl of the sea, and they shall abide with thee, and great shall be thy wealth. And the sunlight which is in the diamond shall warm thee and comfort thy heart; and the moonlight which is in the pearl shall give thee peace in the night-time, and thy children shall be to thee a garland of roses in the land of the unbeliever.' And the star floated down from the palm-branches and touched me with his hand, and breathed upon my lips the cool breath of the outer firmament, and departed. Then I awoke and saw him again in his place far down the horizon, and he was alone, for the dawn was in the sky and the lesser lights were extinguished. And I rose from the stony stairway that seemed like a bed of flowers for the hopeful dream, and I turned westward, and praised Allah, and went my way.

"The sun being up, all was life, and the life in me spoke of a most capacious appetite. So I cast about for a shop where I might buy a little food with my few coppers, and seeing a confectioner spreading out his wares, I went near and took stock of the queer balls of flour and sugar, and strange oily-looking sweetmeats. Having selected what I thought would be within my modest means, I addressed the shopkeeper to call his attention, though I knew he

would not understand me, and I touched with my hand the article I wanted, showing with the other some of the small coins I had. As soon as I touched the sweetmeats the man became very angry, and bounding from his seat called his neighbours together, and they all shouted and screamed at me, and called a man I thought to be a soldier, though he looked more like an ape in his long loose trousers of dirty black, and his untidy red turban, under which cumbrous garments his thin and stunted frame seemed even blacker and more contemptible than nature had made them. I afterwards discovered him to be one of the Bombay police. He seized me by the arm, and I, knowing I had done no wrong, and curious to discover, if possible, what the trouble was, accompanied him whither he led me. After waiting many hours in a kind of little shed where there were more policemen, I was brought before an Englishman. Of course all attempts at explanation were useless. I could speak not a word of anything but Arabic and Persian, and no one present understood either. At last, when I was in despair, trying to muster a few words of Greek I had learned in Istamboul, and failing signally therein, an old man with a long beard looked curiously in at the door of the crowded court. Some instinct told me to appeal to him, and I addressed him in Arabic. To my infinite relief he replied in that tongue, and volunteered to be interpreter. In a few moments I learned that my crime was that I had *touched* the sweetmeats on the counter.

“In India, as you who have lived here doubtless know, it is a criminal offence, punishable by fine or imprisonment, for a non-Hindu person to defile the food of even the lowest caste man. To touch one sweetmeat in a trayful defiles the whole baking, rendering it all unfit for the use of any Hindu, no matter how mean. Knowing nothing of caste and its prejudices, it was with the greatest difficulty that the *moolah*, who was trying to help me out of my trouble, could make me comprehend wherein my wrong-doing lay, and that the English courts, being obliged in their own interest to uphold and protect the caste practices of the Hindus, at the risk of another mutiny, could not make any exception in favour of a stranger unacquainted with Indian customs. So the Englishman who presided said he would have to inflict a fine, but being a very young man, not yet hardened to the despotic ways of Eastern life, he generously paid the fine himself, and gave me a rupee as a present into the bargain. It was only two shillings, but as I had not had so much money for months I was as grateful as though it had been a hundred. If I ever meet him I will requite him, for I owe him all I now possess.

“My case being dismissed, I left the court with the old *moolah*, who took me to his house and inquired of my story, having first given me a good meal of rice and sweetmeats, and that greatest of luxuries, a little pot of fragrant Mocha coffee; he sat in silence while I ate, ministering to my wants, and evidently

pleased with the good he was doing. Then he brought out a package of *birris*, those little cigarettes rolled in leaves that they smoke in Bombay, and I told him what had happened to me. I implored him to put me in the way of obtaining some work by which I could at least support life, and he promised to do so, begging me to stay with him until I should be independent. The day following I was engaged to pull a punkah in the house of an English lawyer connected with an immense lawsuit involving one of the Mohammedan principalities. For this irksome work I was to receive six rupees — twelve shillings — monthly, but before the month was up I was transferred, by the kindness of the English lawyer and the good offices of my co-religionist the *moolah*, to the retinue of the Nizam of Haiderabad, then in Bombay. Since that time I have never known want.

“I soon mastered enough of the dialects to suit my needs, and applied myself to the study of English, for which opportunities were not lacking. At the end of two years I could speak the language enough to be understood, and my accent from the first was a matter of surprise to all; I had also saved out of my gratuities about one hundred rupees. Having been conversant with the qualities of many kinds of precious stones from my youth up, I determined to invest my economies in a diamond or a pearl. Before long I struck a bargain with an old *marwarri* over a small stone, of which I thought he misjudged the value, owing to the rough cutting. The fellow was cun

ning and hard in his dealings, but my superior knowledge of diamonds gave me the advantage. I paid him ninety-three rupees for the little gem, and sold it again in a month for two hundred to a young English ‘collector and magistrate,’ who wanted to make his wife a present. I bought a larger stone, and again made nearly a hundred per cent on the money. Then I bought two, and so on, until having accumulated sufficient capital, I bade farewell to the Court of the Nizam, where my salary never exceeded sixteen rupees a month as scribe and Arabic interpreter, and I went my way with about two thousand rupees in cash and precious stones. I came northwards, and finally settled in Delhi, where I set up as a dealer in gems and objects of intrinsic value. It is now twelve years since I landed in Bombay. I have never soiled my hands with usury, though I have twice advanced large sums at legal interest for purposes I am not at liberty to disclose; I have never cheated a customer or underrated a gem I bought of a poor man, and my wealth, as you may judge from what you have seen, is considerable. Moreover, though in constant intercourse with Hindus and English, I have not forfeited my title to be called a true believer and a follower of the prophet, whose name be blessed.”

Isaacs ceased speaking, and presently the waning moon rose pathetically over the crest of the mountains with that curiously doleful look she wears after the full is past, as if weeping over the loss of her

better half. The wind rose and soughed drearily through the rhododendrons and the pines; and Kiramat Ali, the pipe-bearer, shivered audibly as he drew his long cloth uniform around him. We rose and entered my friend's rooms, where the warmth of the lights, the soft rugs and downy cushions, invited us temptingly to sit down and continue our conversation. But it was late, for Isaacs, like a true Oriental, had not hurried himself over his narrative, and it had been nine o'clock when we sat down to smoke. So I bade him good-night, and, musing on all I had heard and seen, retired to my own apartments, glancing at Sirius and at the unhappy-looking moon before I turned in from the verandah.

CHAPTER II.

IN India—in the plains—people rise before dawn, and it is not till after some weeks' residence in the cooler atmosphere of the mountains that they return to the pernicious habit of allowing the sun to be before them. The hours of early morning, when one either mopes about in loose flannel clothes, or goes for a gallop on the green *maidán*, are without exception the most delicious of the day. I shall have occasion hereafter to describe the morning's proceedings in the plains. On the day after the events recorded in the last chapter I awoke as usual at five o'clock, and meandered out on to the verandah to have a look at the hills, so novel and delicious a sight after the endless flats of the northwest provinces. It was still nearly dark, but there was a faint light in the east, which rapidly grew as I watched it, till, turning the angle of the house, I distinguished a snow-peak over the tops of the dark rhododendrons, and, while I gazed, the first tinge of distant dawning caught the summit, and the beautiful hill blushed, as a fair woman, at the kiss of the awakening sun. The old story, the heaven wooing the earth with a wondrous shower of gold.