

The Angel and the Hermit

translated by Isabel Butler

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There dwelt in Egypt, of old time, a holy father who while yet young of age had withdrawn into a hermitage. There he set himself to great toil and sore labour, fasting, weeping, and living ever in solitude; and much pain and torment he endured of his body that he might bring joy and content to his soul. But oftentimes it betideth that one man, be he religious or layman, hath more of happiness than falleth to the lot of two of his fellows. And to him of whom the tale telleth, it seemed he had few of those delights which God giveth to his own, delights spiritual, to wit, and fain would he have had such as were enjoyed by certain of his acquaintance; for long had he served without reward, him seemed. Now oftentimes God giveth fair gifts to one who doth him scant service; and yet another who is more deserving, he leaveth, mayhap, all his life days in poverty, misery and sore want. And the hermit pondered much wherefore God's judgments are of so great diversity. Now it is summer, now winter; now it is one man, and anon to-morrow no more of him; and our life is even as a wheel that turns, abiding in no one estate. Such judgments are dark, yet are they good and right and just for God doth naught unwisely. And the good man so pondered the matter, that he said to himself he would go forth into the world to see if any man therein were of so great wisdom that he could show him wherefore God made the world after this manner, and wherefore men are not equal in good hap and ill hap. He was all desirous to know of this matter; and albeit there was neither road nor highway near him to his knowledge, he took his staff and set forth from his hut.

He had not travelled far before he came to a footpath; and thereinto the good man turned, and when he had walked on for a space, he looked behind him and saw a youth that came after him with all speed. In his hand he bore a javelin, and full comely he was, and well fashioned, and he was girded up to the knee. His dress was seemly and such as befitteth a sergeant; fair of face he was, and goodly of body; and well might it be seen he served a rich lord and a mighty.

So he drew near and bowed him and gave greeting; and the good man spoke to him, saying: "Now tell me, brother, whom dost thou serve?" "By my faith, sir, that will I full gladly; I am the servant of God who made all things." "Certes, thine is a right good lord, none better canst thou find. But tell me now where thou goest." "Sir," he saith, "I would fain visit the friends and fair ladies I have known in this land"

"Now and if I might go with thee it would please me much, for never till to-day was I in this land and naught know I thereof." "Sir, full fair of speech are ye, and I were right glad of your company; so come with me, fair and dear father, for full well know I the land." Thereupon they set forth together; the varlet goeth before, and after him cometh the hermit, praying to God.

Thus they journeyed the day long, until that they came to a little wood wherein they espied a dead man who had been traitorously slain there, and who had lain so long upon the ground that, what with the summer and the warm weather, the body stunk so foully that there is no man in this earthly world were not sickened thereby, so be that he passed that way and he did not well cover his face. The hermit held his nose and thought to die because of the foul smell. But the varlet straightway went up to the body, nor did he show by any sign that he perceived aught evil therein. "Fair father," he saith, "now come with me, for God hath guided us hither that here we may bury this

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dead man."

"Fair, sweet brother, in God's mercy know that I may not do this thing.

Because of the foul stink I cannot bring myself to set hand to him, for I am sore sickened thereby." Then saith the varlet: "I myself will give him burial, if that I may." And thereupon he dragged him into a ditch that he found hard by, and covered the body over with earth. The hermit marvelled much that the other smelt not the stink, or made no sign or semblance of so doing.

Thereafter the varlet set forth again, and the hermit followed after, striving to keep pace with him. When that they had gone on for a space they encountered upon the way a train of knights and ladies fast riding they drew towards them, and right fair was their array. They came from a feast, and I know not if they had drunk deep, but as they rode one jostled other, and profligate they were of seeming. The varlet covered over his face as well as he might, even as if he could not well endure the odour that came from them, and turned aside from the path. The hermit marvelled much that his comrade should so do, and that he should hide his face because of the knights, he that had not so done for the carrion.

But why tell ye a long tale? They journeyed on after this manner until night, when they lodged with a hermit who gave them shelter full willingly. Such meat as he had he set before them, and gladly they received it. And that evening as soon as they had supped they should have turned to prayer; but the varlet saw that their host gave himself much trouble because of a certain hanap or drinking-cup that he had, and that he spent more pains in drying and rubbing it than he did in praying to God. And the varlet took note where the good man bestowed the hanap, and he stole it away and hid it, for he would not leave it behind.

On the morrow at dawn he carried it away, and thereafter showed it to his comrade. Now when the hermit saw it he was full sorrowful, nor might he hold his peace: "For love of God let us take it back again; you have done me much wrong and hurt in that you have deceived that good man, and robbed him of that which was his. Why have ye done such wickedness?" "Hold your peace and say no more, fair and dear father,"

saith the varlet; "know that there was need for this, and hereafter ye shall learn the truth herein. And whatsoever ye see me do, be not angry, but follow and be silent, for all is done in reason." And the youth so wrought with the hermit that he durst say no more, but goeth after him with bent head.

At evening they came to a city and besought lodging in many places, but could find none; ever it behooved them to pass on, for in that they were penniless the simplest folk looked askance at them; for still in many places do men love money dearer than God, great is the pity and the blame thereof. The hermit and the varlet who were weary and wet to the skin, for it had rained the day long, sat them down upon the perron before the door of a great house. Both entreated the master thereof, but little they won thereby, for he refused them aught. Then saith the hermit to the varlet: "Certes, fair brother, I am sore weary, and here have we no shelter from the rain, let us rather creep under yonder pent-house."

"Nay," saith the varlet, "let us call out again, for yet will I lodge within."

And they so clamoured and beat upon the door that for very weariness they were suffered to enter and take refuge beneath the stairway, where was strewn a little of musty straw. "Here ye may rest until the morning,"

quoth the damsel; and so withdrew her, and left the twain in small comfort, for they had neither eaten nor drunk, nor had they either light or fire.

The master of the house was a usurer, full rich in gear and gold; but rather would he go without bread the day long than give a farthing to God, for the devil had him in his toils. Now that night when he had taken his pleasure

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and eaten and drunk plenteously, a few peas were yet left that might not be eaten, and these he sent to his guests. The damsel brought them the dish, but if she gave them a light I know not. Thus then they passed the night, and when the day dawned the hermit saith: "Now let us go hence." "What say ye, sir?" the varlet made answer; "for naught would I depart and if I did not first commend our host to God. I go now to take leave of him, and inasmuch as he hath given us lodging I would give him this good hanap that is neither of pine nor maplewood but of fair and well polished mazer," the same it was which he had taken from the hermit. Therewith the varlet mounted the stairway, and in the chamber above he met with his host. "Sir," he saith, "we would fain take leave of you; and in return for our lodging we give you this hanap which is right fair, for we would be just and naught beholden unto you." "Now as God may aid me, here is a proper guest," saith the burgher, and taketh the cup. "Fair sir, come ye often back hither; and may God keep ye, for fair is the bargain." So leave taken, the varlet went his way, and with him the hermit.

When they were without the city, "Varlet," saith the hermit, "I know not whether it be in my despite thou dost so bear thyself; thou didst rob the good hermit who was a religious, and now to this man who entertained us so churlishly thou hast given a gift; such deeds are against reason." "Good sir, I pray you hold your peace," saith the varlet, "you are no sage, instead you were brought up in these woods and wastes, and know not good from evil. Now follow me and fear naught, for as yet ye have seen but little."

That day they made good speed, and at night came to a convent wherein the monks gladly gave them lodging, and let serve them freely and bounteously; for great was the brotherhood and full rich in land and rents and harvest, and thereto many a fair house was theirs; no fear had they of times of dearth. Right well were those twain lodged; but in the morning when they were shod for their journey, the varlet lighted a brand and laid it at the foot of his bed. There was good plenty of straw, and the room was low, and lightly the blaze caught. Then the youth called to the hermit to hasten, saying: "Hie you fast, for anon the fire will run through all the place." And the hermit made what speed he might, for of the deed he was in sore fear. The varlet goeth before him, and leadeth him up a great hill from the top whereof he looketh abroad, and saith to the hermit: "Lo you, how clear and bright the abbey burneth."

But the hermit crieth out aloud, and teareth and beateth his breast. "Woe and alas! what will become of me? Unhappy the father that engendered me, unhappy she who bore me, and most unhappy me in that I have lost all. Alack for my soul and my salvation! Lo now, I have become a burner of houses; never was man so wofully betrayed. Alack the day that I met this youth, and woe is me that I became his comrade, for he hath robbed me of my life and my soul!" And sore he rendeth himself with his nails.

Thereupon the varlet cometh to him and beginneth to comfort him.

"Nay, I have no love for thee," saith the good man; "thou hast taken from me my life." "Sir," the youth maketh answer, "ye do wrong to make such sorrow for naught. In the beginning I covenanted with you to do these things, and thereby to bring you to wisdom; now come away and say no more." And he so soothed the good man that he led him away in quietness.

All that day they fared on together, and at night they came to a city that stood beside a wide river, and whereof the burghers were rich and of good conditions. The youth made great cheer in that he knew the place well, and goeth straight unto a house wherein it seemeth him they might lodge at their case. He cometh to the door with his master and asketh shelter in God's name. And right good cheer was theirs methinketh, for the burgher was a goodly man. A wife he had, and one child, a boy whom they dearly loved; no other had they and they were already waxing old; and the boy was ten years of his age. They washed the feet of the two travellers, and gave them to eat and to drink, and let them sleep until the day. In the morning when the time was come to depart, "Fair host," the varlet saith, "lend us the child for a little, that he may guide us beyond the bridge since we must pass that way." "That will I gladly. Come, fair son," and straightway the boy riseth up; he goeth before, and the other twain follow after. Now when they were come to the bridge, where there was neither edge-stone nor parapet, the varlet so jostled the

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boy that he fell down into the water, and the stream swept him away and drowned him. "Herein have we done well," saith the varlet; "and stay, sir hermit, and ye will, for ye shall not be destroyed or slain." But the hermit set himself to run, for he was all a-sweat with fear, and well-nigh had he slain himself for sorrow. When he was come into the fields he cast himself down. "Alas, unhappy that I am, what will become of me," saith the hermit. "Woe, worth the day whereon I was born, for now I am come to despair and madness. Alas, caitiff that I am, why did I leave the place whereto I was appointed and wherein I had come to my old age? The devil hath betrayed and destroyed me. Never again shall I know joy nor peace. Was I not a party to the burning of the abbey and the death of the child? Christ! what will become of me? Now with mine own hands will I slay myself!"

Then saith the varlet within himself: "It behooveth me to go comfort that old man and foolish." So he getteth his javelin into his hand and cometh to the hermit, and saith: "Fond and simple that ye are, now give ear unto me. I am nowise mad; and do ye hold your peace and hear reason which shall bring you solace. Now shall be shown unto you the virtue of my deeds which ye thought done against reason. Now give heed unto me, fair, sweet sir; well know I that ye are a hermit, but ye were tempted of the devil when ye thought to go forth into the world to seek out a man of wisdom who knew all things, and who would tell you why God made the world such as we now see it. You would seek to understand his judgments, so do ye dote in your old age, whereas ye should have amended and bettered thyself; no whit wouldst thou struggle against this temptation, but thou didst wander forth from thy house, thou that wert bewildered as a silly sheep. The devil would have put thee to shame, and if God had not had pity upon thee, and sent a holy angel to thee to lead and guide thee; for thy sake he sent me to the earth, for know that I am an angel. And I have shown thee that thou soughtest to know, and that which it was thy will to seek in the world, but thou knewest it not. Now listen and thou shalt learn.

"And for the dead body which lay in the wood and rotted upon the ground, and whereof ye smelt so great a stink that ye might not aid me therewith, it is but in the course of nature that a body should rot, and therefore should it be buried; but such odour vexes me not, nor was it displeasing to Jesus Christ, for it is nowise contrary to nature; therefore I had no will to hide my face, but thou that wert neither God nor angel might not endure it. But when I saw the knights and squires and ladies that came from such a feast, each with a chaplet of flowers upon his head, and all fulfilled with luxury, they so stunk in my nostrils that it behooved me to hold my nose. Such evil odours rise even to God in paradise, and he lamenteth them to his own; Jesus Christ will revenge him of such sin and wickedness; and for them, they are filled with such vileness I have no will to say more thereof; and for the stink of them I covered my face.

"And now I will tell thee of the hermit whose hanap I stole, which deed seemed evil in thy sight. But the cup did him much hurt, for that he gave himself more toil and trouble in the rubbing and polishing thereof than he took in praying to God; to it he gave the greater part of his days and thereby was he come to sore peril, for it is God's will that a man should love naught save him only, and the more if that man be a hermit and a religious. Now there are certain men who hold their possessions so dear that they will lend them to none, and rather than so do they hide them away; and this methinketh is a great sin, that they should make of them an indulgence and an idol; and certes, he is but foolish who enters into religion and giveth not his whole heart to God. Now the hermit had set his heart upon the drinking-cup which he loved overmuch, and therefore God willed that I should take it from him.

"And again I will tell thee of the usurer who left us to call and clamour at his door, and where we entered only through vexation. In the morning when it was time to depart, I told thee I would take courteous leave of our host and would give him the hanap; God willed that I should so do, for else the usurer, when he received his damnation, might have said: 'Lord, Lord, I gave lodging to thy people; can I in justice be damned?' But God cares naught for the alms of such as he, and no usurer shall be saved if he does not return that which he hath wrongfully received of others; God will not permit or suffer him to give in charity the goods which are not rightfully his. If he bringeth a poor man into his house and shareth with him his bread, God will straightway return it to him again. Here and now, in this world, he taketh his portion, for into no other paradise shall he come. And therefore fair, sweet friend, God willed that he should be doubly paid by us. Now judge if it were well done."

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"I am content," saith the hermit; "but tell me now of the abbey, and wherefore ye set fire to it; surely herein thou didst ill." Saith the angel: "I will tell thee in all truth. When the order was first established it was poor and unfavoured; the monks lived without chattels or revenue, yet they had sufficient unto each day, for God gave plenteously unto them that were their purveyors. In those days the brethren of the convent led holy lives and served God with all their might; and never, either morning or evening, did they neglect or fail of prayer. But now they had come to such a pass the order was going to destruction, their rule was no longer heeded by them, for they would not look before and feared neither God nor man. Despite all their rents and goods they had no will to visit the poor nor aid them, nor do aught in charity. To get money and heap up wealth that they might take their pleasure, they grew false and cruel. Each one thought to be abbot, or at the least, provost, steward or cellarer; and each one was all desirous to have his the richest abbey. The churches and chapterhouses were neglected, and the refectory and halls were given over to idle talk and tale telling; and God willed that they should lose these things and become poor. Never shall ye hear praise of a rich monk; but know ye well a monk should be lowly, and he would be truly religious. Among the poor shall ye find God, there is his true hostel upon the earth; and therefore it was God's will to bring these monks again to poverty, to amend them of their folly and sin. Those who desired power and place will no longer, in that it would now yield them nought. They will build them new houses nought so rich as before, and the poor labourer will gain somewhat of the wealth of the monks, who henceforth will be more compassionate. For such reasons God made me to kindle the fire that destroyed all the convent." Quoth the hermit:

"Well didst thou do and herein I hold me content. But why didst thou drown the child of the good man who made us such cheer? For nought will I believe that was not very murder." Saith the angel: "Now hear why this was done in all justice; wise is he who learneth well.

"Now know, fair and dear hermit, the good man ye saw yesterday and who entertained us with such good will, had lived together with his wife for thirty years uprightly. Never a poor man came to his house but he gave him lodging and shared with him what he had, and so much of his fortune he gave away for God's sake that little was left him thereof; and he shone with charity. But much he desired to have a son, that he might leave his lands to him and teach him to serve God with all his heart. Many prayers he made to heaven, and many tears he wept, and at last God granted them a child. Ten years of age or more he had come to be, and the good man had grown hard of heart because of the son to whom he would bequeath his goods, and had so set himself to the heaping up of money that his heart had no other thought; that which had been his wont he turned from, and had grown cold and fainthearted; his good deeds he forgot, and within a short space he would have become a usurer rather than see his child poor in goods and heritage; it was in his heart, and such a thought would soon have come to him that all his well doing had been undone, and he had lost his soul and that of his son. But now through the loss of the child he hath escaped all peril, and the child knew nought of sin, wholly pure he was, wherefore he was taken to such a place that his soul is now in paradise. And his father will amend him, and he and the mother will be more fearful, and will turn to deeds of charity. So all three shall be saved, and God did graciously to the parents in that he took the child to his profit. Now have I made known to you, fair, sweet friend, the reason of my deeds. In this wise God hath shown you how divers are his judgments, that in this world he taxes his people and renders them poor and destitute; and oft-times grants great riches to his enemies, for that they shall have no part in heaven So it is even as I tell you; and now may I abide here no longer; bethink ye of well doing, get ye back to your hermitage and do penance." And forthright the youth changeth his semblance, and became a wondrous angel; and he rose into heaven, singing, "Gloria in excelsis Deo."

To the hermit it seemed he had heard him for too short a space, and fain had he not been parted from such joy. He cast himself upon the ground and stretched out his arms in the form of the cross, and weeping, gave thanks to God for the goodness he had shown him. He returned again to the hermitage which he had left in his folly; there he lived all his life, and when death came to him God saved his soul, and crowned it in paradise.

Now may God grant us in this life such desire of well doing that we shall win the light whereby we may know God and man.