

The Amir's Homily

Rudyard Kipling

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His Royal Highness Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan, G.C.S.I., and trusted ally of Her Imperial Majesty the Queen of England and Empress of India, is a gentleman for whom all right-thinking people should have a profound regard. Like most other rulers, he governs not as he would, but as he can, and the mantle of his authority covers the most turbulent race under the stars. To the Afghan neither life, property, law, nor kingship are sacred when his own lusts prompt him to rebel. He is a thief by instinct, a murderer by heredity and training, and frankly and bestially immoral by all three. None the less he has his own crooked notions of honour, and his character is fascinating to study. On occasion he will fight without reason given till he is hacked in pieces; on other occasions he will refuse to show fight till he is driven into a corner. Herein he is as unaccountable as the gray wolf, who is his blood-brother.

And these men His Highness rules by the only weapon that they understand the fear of death, which among some Orientals is the beginning of wisdom. Some say that the Amir's authority reaches no farther than a rifle bullet can range; but as none are quite certain when their king may be in their midst, and as he alone holds every one of the threads of Government, his respect is increased among men. Gholam Hyder, the Commander-in-chief of the Afghan army, is feared reasonably, for he can impale; all Kabul city fears the Governor of Kabul, who has power of life and death through all the wards; but the Amir of Afghanistan, though outlying tribes pretend otherwise when his back is turned, is dreaded beyond chief and governor together. His word is red law; by the gust of his passion falls the leaf of man's life, and his favour is terrible. He has suffered many things, and been a hunted fugitive before he came to the throne, and he understands all the classes of his people. By the custom of the East any man or woman having a complaint to make, or an enemy against whom to be avenged, has the right of speaking face to face with the king at the daily public audience. This is personal government, as it was in the days of Harun al Raschid of blessed memory, whose times exist still and will exist long after the English have passed away.

The privilege of open speech is of course exercised at certain personal risk. The king may be pleased, and raise the speaker to honour for that very bluntness of speech which three minutes later brings a too imitative petitioner to the edge of the ever ready blade. And the people love to have it so, for it is their right.

It happened upon a day in Kabul that the Amir chose to do his day's work in the Baber Gardens, which lie a short distance from the city of Kabul. A light table stood before him, and round the table in the open air were grouped generals and finance ministers according to their degree. The Court and the long tail of feudal chiefs men of blood, fed and cowed by blood stood in an irregular semicircle round the table, and the wind from the Kabul orchards blew among them. All day long sweating couriers dashed in with letters from the outlying districts with rumours of rebellion, intrigue, famine, failure of payments, or announcements of treasure on the road; and all day long the Amir would read the dockets, and pass such of these as were less private to the officials whom they directly concerned, or call up a waiting chief for a word of explanation. It is well to speak clearly to the ruler of Afghanistan. Then the grim head, under the black astrachan cap with the diamond star in front, would nod gravely, and that chief would return to his fellows. Once that afternoon a woman clamoured for divorce against her husband, who was bald, and the Amir, hearing both sides of the case, bade her pour curds over the bare scalp, and lick them, off, that the hair might grow again, and she be contented. Here the Court laughed, and the woman withdrew, cursing her king under her breath.

The Amir's Homily

But when twilight was falling, and the order of the Court was a little relaxed, there came before the king, in custody, a trembling haggard wretch, sore with much buffeting, but of stout enough build, who had stolen three rupees of such small matters does His Highness take cognisance.

'Why did you steal?' said he; and when the king asks questions they do themselves service who answer directly.

'I was poor, and no one gave. Hungry, and there was no food.'

'Why did you not work?'

'I could find no work, Protector of the Poor, and I was starving.'

'You lie. You stole for drink, for lust, for idleness, for anything but hunger, since any man who will may find work and daily bread.'

The prisoner dropped his eyes. He had attended the Court before, and he knew the ring of the death-tone.

'Any man may get work. Who knows this so well as I do? for I too have been hungered not like you, bastard scum, but as any honest man may be, by the turn of Fate and the will of God.'

Growing warm, the Amir turned to his nobles all arow and thrust the hilt of his sabre aside with his elbow.

'You have heard this Son of Lies? Hear me tell a true tale. I also was once starved, and tightened my belt on the sharp belly-pinch. Nor was I alone, for with me was another, who did not fail me in my evil days, when I was hunted, before ever I came to this throne. And wandering like a houseless dog by Kandahar, my money melted, melted, melted till ' He flung out a bare palm before the audience. 'And day upon day, faint and sick, I went back to that one who waited, and God knows how we lived, till on a day I took our best lihaf silk it was, fine work of Iran, such as no needle now works, warm, and a coverlet for two, and all that we had. I brought it to a money-lender in a by-lane, and I asked for three rupees upon it. He said to me, who am now the King, "You are a thief. This is worth three hundred." "I am no thief," I answered, "but a prince of good blood, and I am hungry." "Prince of wandering beggars," said that money-lender, "I have no money with me, but go to my house with my clerk and he will give you two rupees eight annas, for that is all I will lend." So I went with the clerk to the house, and we talked on the way, and he gave me the money. We lived on it till it was spent, and we fared hard. And then that clerk said, being a young man of a good heart, "Surely the money-lender will lend yet more on that lihaf," and he offered me two rupees. These I refused, saying, "Nay; but get me some work." And he got me work, and I, even I, Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan, wrought day by day as a coolie, bearing burdens, and labouring of my hands, receiving four annas wage a day for my sweat and backache. But he, this bastard son of naught, must steal! For a year and four months I worked, and none dare say that I lie, for I have a witness, even that clerk who is now my friend.'

Then there rose in his place among the Sirdars and the nobles one clad in silk, who folded his hands and said, 'This is the truth of God, for I, who by the favour of God and the Amir, am such as you know, was once clerk to that money-lender.'

There was a pause, and the Amir cried hoarsely to the prisoner, throwing scorn upon him, till he ended with the dread 'Dar arid,' which clinches justice.

So they led the thief away, and the whole of him was seen no more together; and the Court rustled out of its silence, whispering, 'Before God and the Prophet, but this is a man!'