The Shaving Of Shagpat

It is nearly forty years since I first heard of *The Shaving of Shagpat*. I was newly come, in all my callow ardour, into the covenant of Art and Letters, and I was moving about, still bewildered, in a new world. In this new world, one afternoon, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, standing in front of his easel, remarked to all present whom it should concern, that *The Shaving of Shagpat* was a book which Shakespeare might have been glad to write. I now understand that in the warm Rossetti-language this did not mean that there was anything specially reminiscent of the Bard of Avon in this book, but simply that it was a monstrous fine production, and worthy of all attention. But at the time I expected, from such a title, something in the way of a belated *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Love's Labour's Lost*. I was fully persuaded that it must be a comedy, and as the book even then was rare, and as I was long pursuing the loan of it, I got this dramatic notion upon my mind, and to this day do still clumsily connect it with the idea of Shakespeare. But in truth *The Shaving of Shagpat* has no other analogy with those plays, which Bacon would have written if he had been so plaguily occupied, than that it is excellent in quality and of the finest literary flavour.

The ordinary small collection of rarities has no room for three-volume novels, those signs-manual of our British dulness and crafty disdain for literature. One or two of these *simulacra*, these sham-semblances of books, I possess, because honoured friends have given them to me; even so, I would value the gift more in the decency of a single volume. The dear little duodecimos of the last century, of course, are welcome in a library. That was a happy day, when by the discovery of a *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, I completed my set of Smollett in the original fifteen volumes. But after the first generation of novelists, the sham system began to creep in. With Fanny Burney, novels grow too bulky, and it is a question whether even Scott or Jane Austen should be possessed in the original form. Of the moderns, only Thackeray is bibliographically desirable. Hence even of Mr. George Meredith's fiction I make no effort to possess first editions; yet *The Shaving of Shagpat* is an exception. I toiled long to secure it, and, now that I hold it, may its modest vermilion cover shine always like a lamp upon my shelves! It is not fiction to a bibliophile; it is worthy of all the honour done to verse.

Within the last ten years of his life we had the great pleasure of seeing tardy justice done at length to the genius of Mr. George Meredith. I like to think that, after a long and noble struggle against the inattention of the public, after the pouring of high music for two generations into ears whose owners seemed to have wilfully sealed them with wax, so that only the most staccato and least happy notes ever reached their dulness, George Meredith did, before the age of seventy, reap a little of his reward. I am told that the movement in favour of him began in America; if so, more praise to American readers, who had to teach us to appreciate De Quincey and Praed before we knew the value of those men.
Yet is there much to do. Had George Meredith been a Frenchman, what monographs had ere this been called forth by his work; in Germany, or Italy, or Denmark even, such gifts as his would long ago have found their classic place above further discussion. But England is a Gallio, and in defiance of Mr. Le Gallienne, cares little for the things of literature.

If a final criticism of George Meredith existed, where in it would The Shaving of Shagpat find its place? There is fear that in competition with the series of analytical studies of modern life that stretches from The Ordeal of Richard Feverel to One of our Conquerors, it might chance to be pushed away with a few lines of praise. Now, I would not seem so paradoxical as to say that when an extravaganza is held up to me in one hand, and a masterpiece of morality like The Egoist in the other, I can doubt which is the greater book; but there are moods in which I am jealous of the novels, and wish to be left alone with my Arabian Entertainment. Delicious in this harsh world of reality to fold a mist around us, and out of it to evolve the yellow domes and black cypresses, the silver fountains and marble pillars, of the fabulous city of Shagpat. I do not know any later book than The Shaving in which an Englishman has allowed his fancy, untrammelled by any sort of moral or intellectual subterfuge, to go a-roaming by the light of the moon. We do this sort of thing no longer. We are wholly given up to realism, we are harshly pressed upon on all sides by the importunities of excess of knowledge. If we talk of gryphons, the zoologists are upon us; of Oolb or Akli, the geographers flourish their maps at us in defiance. But the author of The Shaving of Shagpat, in the bloom of his happy youthful genius, defied all this pedantry. In a little address which has been suppressed in later editions he said (December 8, 1855)

"It has seemed to me that the only way to tell an Arabian Story was by imitating the style and manner of the Oriental Story-tellers. But such an attempt, whether successful or not, may read like a translation. I therefore think it better to prelude this Entertainment by an avowal that it springs from no Eastern source, and is in every respect an original Work."

If one reader of The Shaving of Shagpat were to confess the truth he would say that to him at least the other, the genuine Oriental tales, appear the imitation, and not a very good imitation. The true genius of the East breathes in Meredith's pages, and the Arabian Nights, at all events in the crude literality of Sir Richard Burton, pale before them like a mirage. The variety of scenes and images, the untiring evolution of plot, the kaleidoscopic shifting of harmonious colours, all these seem of the very essence of Arabia, and to coil directly from some bottle of a genie. Ah! what a bottle! As we whirl along in the vast and glowing bacchanal, we cry, like Sganarelle:

*Qu'ils sont doux--*
*Bouteille jolie--*
*Qu'ils sont doux*
*Vos petits glou-glous;*
*Ah! Bouteille, ma mie;*
*Pourquoi vous videz-vous?*

Ah! why indeed? For The Shaving of Shagpat is one of those very rare modern books of which it is certain that they are too short, and even our excitement at the Mastery of the Event is tamed by a sense that the show is closing, and that Shibli Bagarag has been too promptly successful in smiting through the Identical. But perhaps of all gifts there is none more rare than this of clearing the board and leaving the reader still hungry.

Who shall say, in dealing with such a book, what passage in it is best or worst? Either the fancy, carried away utterly captive, follows the poet whither he will, or the whole conception is a failure. Perhaps, after the elemental splendour and storm of the final scene, what clings most to the memory is how Shibli Bagarag, hard beset in the Cave of Chrysolites, touched the great lion with the broken sapphire hair of Garraveen; or again, how on the black coast of the enchanted sea, wandering by moonlight, he found the sacred Lily, and tore it up, and lo! its bulb was a palpitating heart of human flesh; or how Bhanavar called the unwilling serpents too often, and failed to win her beauty back, till, at an awful price she once more, and for the last time, contrived to call her body-guard of snakes hissing and screaming around her.
There is surely no modern book so unsullied as this is by the modern spirit, none in which the desire to teach a lesson, to refer knowingly to topics of the day, or worst of all, to be incontinently funny, interferes less with the tender magic of Oriental fancy, or with the childlike, earnest faith in what is utterly outside the limits of experience. It belongs to that infancy of the world, when the happy guileless human being still holds that somewhere there is a flower to be plucked, a lamp to be rubbed, or a form of words to be spoken which will reverse the humdrum laws of Nature, call up unwilling spirits bound to incredible services, and change all this brown life of ours to scarlet and azure and mother-of-pearl. Little by little, even our children are losing this happy gift of believing the incredible, and that class of writing which seems to require less effort than any other, and to be a mere spinning of gold thread out of the poet's inner consciousness, is less and less at command, and when executed gives less and less satisfaction. The gnomes of Pope, the fays and "trilbys" of Nodier, even the fairy-world of Doyle, are breathed upon by a race that has grown up habituated to science. But even for such a race it must be long before the sumptuous glow and rich triumphant humour of *The Shaving of Shagpat* have lost all their attraction.

(The end)
Edmund Gosse's essay: Shaving Of Shagpat

**By Edmund Gosse**