Hatim Tai had a great reputation among the Arabs of old for the lavishness of his gifts and alms.

“Have you ever met anyone more excellent than yourself?” his friends once asked him.

“Yes,” replied Hatim Tai.

“Who was he?”

“One day I had forty camels sacrificed and I offered a feast to whoever would like to come and share in it. Then I set out with several chiefs to invite guests from far and wide. On the way we came across a woodcutter who had just cut a bundle of thorns. This was the way he earned his livelihood. Seeing that he was poor, I asked him why he did not go to the many feasts given by Hatim Tai. ‘Those who earn their living,’ he answered me, ‘have no need of the bounty of Hatim Tai.’ ”

Why then did Hatim Tai declare that the woodcutter was a better man than himself?

It was because he thought it nobler to work and to provide for oneself than to give others gifts which cost no effort or sacrifice and which, moreover, discourage them from being self-reliant.

Of course it is quite natural that friends should give presents to their friends; it is good that strong arms should come to the help of the poor and the needy; but an able-bodied man should work with his hands, not hold them out for alms. Of course this implies no reflection on those who consecrate themselves entirely to the contemplative life and the search for wisdom.

* * *
Words of Long Ago

Though the woodcutter’s conduct was noble, yet it was less so than that of the Persian prince whose story I shall tell you.

He was a prince of ancient times and his name was Gushtasp.

He was much annoyed that his father did not treat him as heir to the throne, so he left his native land and wandered to the West. Alone and hungry, he realised that from then on he would have to work for his living. So he went to the sovereign of the land and said to him:

“I am a skilled writer and I should be happy to be employed as a scribe.”

He was told to wait for a few days, for no scribes were needed at the moment. But he was too hungry to wait, so he went to the camel-drivers to ask for work. They did not need any new helper; however, seeing his dire need, they gave him something to eat.

A little further on, Gushtasp stopped at the door of a forge and offered his services to the smith.

“Here,” said the man to him, “you can help me to hammer this piece of iron.” And he placed a hammer in Gushtasp’s hands.

The prince had tremendous strength. He lifted the heavy hammer, brought it down on the anvil and smashed it at the first stroke. The smith was furious and immediately turned him out.

And so Gushtasp started wandering once more in great distress.

Whichever way he turned, there was no way in which he could show his usefulness.

At last he met a farmer working in a cornfield, who took pity on him and gave him food and shelter.

One day there came the news that the daughter of the king of Rum was of an age to marry and that all young men of princely family were invited to the royal banquet. Gushtasp decided to go there and sat at table among all the others. Princess Kitaban saw him, loved him and gave him a bunch of roses as a token of her favour.
The king took a violent dislike for Gushtasp in his poverty. He dared not forbid his daughter to marry him, but as soon as they were married he drove them out of his palace. So they went to live in the heart of the forest and built their hut not far from a river.

Gushtasp was a great hunter. Each day he would cross the river by boat, catch an elk or a wild ass, give half to the boatman and take the rest home to his wife.

One day the boatman brought a young man named Mabrin to see Gushtasp.

“My Lord,” said Mabrin, “I wish to marry the second daughter of the king, your wife’s sister, but I cannot unless I kill the wolf who is ravaging the king’s lands. And I do not know how to do it.”

“I will do it for you,” said Gushtasp the hunter.

He went out into the desert and when he found the monster, he shot it down with two arrows and then cut off its head with his hunting knife.

The king came to see the dead beast, and in his joy gave his second daughter to Mabrin.

Some time later, the boatman brought another young man named Ahrun to see Gushtasp. Ahrun wished to marry the third daughter of the king, but first he had to kill a dragon. Gushtasp promised that he would accomplish this new feat.

He took some knives and made them into a ball bristling with sharp points. Then he set out on his quest and found the dragon with fiery breath. He shot many arrows at the body of the monster, leaping from side to side to avoid its claws. Then he fastened the ball of knives to the end of a pike and thrust it down the dragon’s throat. The dragon closed its jaws and fell. Then the prince dispatched it with his sword.

Thus Ahrun married the third daughter of the king.

You will not be surprised to hear that in the course of time such a valiant prince became the king of Persia in succession to his father. It was during the reign of Gushtasp that the holy
prophet Zerdusht, or Zoroaster, taught the Persians faith in Ormazd, Lord of light and sun and fire and of righteousness and justice.

* * *

However, you can see that Gushtasp did not immediately find his place and work in the world.

He tried many things without success, and even at first incurred the enmity of many men, for example that of the good smith.

At last, however, he gained his true station in life and was able to help others until the time came for him to govern them wisely. And it was precisely in helping others that he was better than the woodcutter of whom we have just spoken; for, according to the story, the woodcutter was content to work for himself. Gushtasp was also better than the generous Hatim Tai, for instead of giving from the excess of his wealth, the Persian prince gave the strength of his arm and even risked his life for the sake of others.

None is more worthy of respect than one who, relying on himself, is able by his own effort not only to provide for all his needs, but to increase the well-being and the prosperity of those around him.

Respect the father, engineer or woodcutter, writer or labourer, tradesman, smith or explorer, who by his work, whatever it may be, earns a good living and increases the well-being of his family.

Respect the worker who, in order to serve both his own interests and those of his comrades, joins with them to organise co-operative stores or workshops, or trade-unions which enable each one to assert his rights by raising the powerful voice of the many instead of the weak and pleading voice of an isolated individual.

These workers’ associations teach workmen to rely on their own strength and to help one another.
And you too, school-children, learn to enrich your intelligence by concentrating on the task your master gives you. And, while you mount the steps of knowledge as best you can, learn also to help, when need arises, the friend who is less alert and skilful than yourself.

In fairy-tales, one has only to utter a word or rub a lamp or wave a wand for genies to appear and carry people through the air, build palaces in the twinkling of an eye and cause armies of elephants and horsemen to spring from the ground.

But personal effort brings about still greater marvels: it covers the soil with rich harvests, tames wild beasts, tunnels through mountains, erects dykes and bridges, builds cities, launches ships on the ocean and flying machines in the air; in short it gives more well-being and security to all.

By personal effort man becomes more noble, more just, more kind: this is the true progress.