Nine

Right Judgment

CHOOSE a good straight stick and dip it half-way into some water: the stick will appear to be bent in the middle. But that is an illusion, and if you were to think that the stick was actually bent, your judgment would be wrong. Pull out the stick and you will see that in fact it is still straight.

On the other hand, it is possible for a stick that is actually bent in the middle to appear straight if it is carefully placed in a particular way in the water.

Well, men are often like sticks. If you look at them from a certain angle, you may not see them as straight as they are, and sometimes too, they may have a deceptive appearance and seem straight when they are crooked. That is why you should trust appearances as little as possible and never judge anyone lightly.

In India, a mendicant monk was going across the country asking for alms. In a meadow he met a ram. The furious animal got ready to rush at him, and to do so, took a few steps back and lowered its head.

“Ah!” said the monk, “here is a good and intelligent animal. He has recognised that I am a man full of merit, and he is bowing down before me to greet me.”

Just then the ram rushed forward and knocked the virtuous man to the ground with one blow of its head.

So it can happen that one judges too respectfully and trustingly those who least deserve it. For sometimes there are people who are like the wolf that the good La Fontaine speaks of — the wolf whom the sheep took for the shepherd because it had put on his cape; or else like the ass who was taken at first for a
dangerous animal because it had put on a lion’s skin.

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But if one can make mistakes like this by trusting to appearances, it more often happens, on the contrary, that one is tempted to make hasty and uncharitable judgments on others.

The Shah of Persia Ismail Sefevi had just conquered the land of Khorasan and was returning to his capital.

As he was passing by the home of the poet Hatifi, he thought he would visit him. He did not have the patience to go as far as the gate of the house, so great was his desire to see the famous man, so, catching sight of the branch of a tree overhanging the wall, he caught hold of it, jumped over the enclosure and into the poet’s garden.

What would you have thought if someone had suddenly entered your house like this? You would probably have taken him for a thief and given him a very poor welcome.

Hatifi did well not to judge by appearances or according to the first impression of the moment. He gave a warm welcome to his odd visitor. And later he wrote new poems on the exploits that the Shah had been so eager to tell him.

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In general nothing is easier than to see in others what is least to their advantage; each one has his faults, to which his neighbours give more attention than he does. But what we should look for in every man, if we do not want to judge him too unjustly, is what is best in him. “If your friend has but one eye,” says the proverb, “look at his good side.”

A friend of yours may seem awkward or slow, and yet be the most hardworking student of the class.

And your teacher whom you find strict and severe probably loves you much and desires only your progress.
A friend who sometimes seems so boring or so surly to you, may after all be the best friend you have.

And how many people who are looked upon as wicked and are treated harshly, carry deep in their hearts something which no one has been able to perceive.

A great wolf was causing terror in the woods and fields around the town of Gubbio, so that the people dared not even venture on the roads. The monster was killing men and animals alike.

At last the good Saint Francis decided to face the frightful creature. He went out of the town, followed at a distance by many men and women. As he drew near to the forest, the wolf suddenly sprang at the saint with wide open jaws. But Francis calmly made a sign and the wolf lay down peacefully at his feet like a lamb.

“Brother Wolf,” Saint Francis told him, “you have done much harm in this land, and you deserve a murderer’s death. All men hate you. But I would gladly make peace between you and my friends of Gubbio.”

The wolf bowed his head and wagged his tail.

“Brother Wolf,” Francis went on, “I promise you that if you will keep peace with these people, they will be kind to you and give you food every day. So, will you promise to do no more harm from now on?”

Then the wolf bowed his head very low and put his right paw in the saint’s hand. In this way they made a pact together, in good faith.

Then Francis led the wolf into the marketplace of Gubbio and repeated before the assembled citizens what he had just said to the wolf, and once more the wolf put his paw in the saint’s hand as a pledge of his good behaviour for the future.

The wolf lived in the town for two years and did no harm to anyone. Each day the townsfolk would bring him his food, and they all mourned him when he died.

However bad the wolf may have seemed, in truth there was
something in him which no one had discovered until the saint had called him his brother. In this legend the wolf no doubt represents some great offender much hated by other men. It is intended to show that even in those who seem lost beyond hope, there still remain some seeds of good that can be awakened with a little love.

All good cabinet-makers know that there is no plank, however rotten, in which one cannot find some sound fibres. The bad workman will throw away the plank in ignorance and contempt, but the good workman will take it up, remove what is worm-eaten and carefully plane the rest. And out of the hardest knots in the wood, the artist can shape the most heart-stirring figures.

In the cheerless land of Guiana, which is so fatal to Europeans, prisons have been established for convicts sentenced to hard labour or transportation. Some years ago, a military warder was taking a working party to Cayenne when by accident he fell into the harbour just as the tide was coming in.

At certain times, at low tide, this harbour is almost completely covered with sand, so that it is impossible to disembark. On the other hand, at full tide, it is flooded by extremely swift currents, bringing the sharks, which infest the entire coast, in great numbers.

The warder who had fallen into the water was in a very critical situation, for he hardly knew how to swim. Every second that passed increased his danger of being snapped up by one of these voracious creatures. Suddenly one of the convicts, heeding only his nobler feelings, threw himself into the water. He was able to catch hold of the warder and after a great effort, to save him.

This man was a criminal, and normally those who saw him pass by in his convict’s uniform, marked with ignominious letters and the number which now took the place of his name, would turn away in contempt, thinking him unworthy of a single glance
or word of compassion. And yet their judgment was quite unjust, for in him there was compassion. In spite of all his faults, there was nobility in his heart: he was ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of the very man who was bound by duty never to show him any mercy.


Here is yet another story about convicts that will show you how mistaken one can be if one judges men by appearances.

Two released convicts had been hired by a gold-prospector from the Upper Maroni. Every year he would entrust them with the gold grains and the nuggets obtained by “placer mining”, which they were to take to the nearest gold-market, thirty days’ journey by canoe down river.

One day the two ex-convicts decided to escape.

For when convicts have completed their sentence, they are not free to return home, but have to stay in the penal colony, usually for the rest of their lives. However, as Guiana is a wild and uninhabited country, full of virgin forests and swamps, where the ex-convicts are in continual danger of dying of fever or starvation, most of them try to escape as soon as the opportunity arises.

So, wishing to take advantage of the canoe at their disposal, the two hired convicts decided to make for the Dutch colony on the opposite bank of the river.

But first, they placed the stock of gold belonging to their master in a safe spot, and sent him a letter indicating the place where his property lay.

“You have always been good to us,” they said, “and while we are escaping, we feel some scruples about robbing you of what you entrusted to our care.”

These two convicts had once been sentenced for theft. The gold they were carrying meant quite a small fortune for them, but something in them was honest and straightforward. To everyone
who knew their story and judged them according to their past, they were nothing but vile and worthless criminals; but for the sake of the man who was able to trust them, they could, in spite of everything, become trustworthy once more.

Little children, let us be prudent and charitable in our thoughts; let us be careful not to judge our fellow-men too hastily; and even let us refrain from judging them at all when we can avoid it.