

Fourteen

Modesty

WHO IS this coming to the door of this Japanese house? It is the flower-artist, the man who is skilled in arranging flowers.

The master of the house brings a tray with some flowers, a pair of scissors, a knife, a little saw, and a beautiful vase.

“Sir,” he says, “I cannot make a bouquet beautiful enough for such a beautiful vase.”

“I am sure you can,” replies the master politely as he leaves the room.

Left alone, the artist sets to work, cutting, snipping, twisting and tying until a beautiful bunch of flowers fills the vase—a delight to the eyes.

The master and his friends enter the room; the artist stands to one side and murmurs, “My bouquet is too poor, let it be taken away.”

“No,” replies the master, “it is good.”

To one side of the table, near the vase, the artist has left a pair of scissors. By this he means that if there is any flaw in the bouquet, anyone can take the scissors and cut away what offends the eye.

The artist has done a fine piece of work, but he would not dream of exalting its merits. He admits that he may have made mistakes. He is modest.

Perhaps the Japanese artist really thinks that his work deserves compliments. I cannot tell his thoughts. But at any rate he does not boast and his behaviour is pleasing.

On the other hand, we smile at people who are vain.

Suleiman, Caliph of Damascus, was like that. One Friday, coming out of his hot bath, he dressed himself in green clothes,

put on a green turban, sat on a green couch, and even the carpet all around was green. And then looking into a mirror and feeling pleased with himself, he said, "The Prophet Mohammed was an apostle, Ali Bakr was a faithful servant of the truth, Omar could distinguish the true from the false, Otman was modest, Ali was brave, Muawiyah was merciful, Yazid was patient, Abdul-Malik a good governor, Walid a powerful master, but I am young and handsome."

The flowers in the vase are beautifully arranged and our eyes are delighted. But it is for us and not for the artist to praise them.

Suleiman is handsome. It is true that there is no harm in his knowing it, but we laugh at his vanity when he gazes at himself in a mirror and tells himself that his good looks make him a finer man than Omar the truthful or Yazid the patient.

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Still more absurd was the vanity of the man who thought that the earth was not large enough for his glory and that he must soar into higher regions.

This is the story.

A king of Persia named Kai Kaus had waged many wars and won many battles. He was so rich with the spoils of his enemies that he built two palaces in the Elburz mountains; and the gold and silver in the chambers were so plentiful that the brightness of the polished metal rivalled the light of day.

Kai Kaus was filled with presumptuous pride; he thought that he was the greatest king on earth.

Iblis, the evil spirit, observing the high opinion the king had of himself, resolved to trick him. He sent a demon disguised as a servant to the palace, with a bunch of flowers to present to the king.

The servant kissed the ground before Kai Kaus and said:

"Sire, no king in the world is like unto you. And yet one realm remains for you to conquer, the upper world, the kingdom

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of the sun, the moon, the planets and the secret corners of the heavens. Follow the birds, O King, and ascend to the sky.”

“But how can I ascend without wings?” asked the king.

“Your wise men will tell you, Sire.”

So King Kai Kaus asked the astrologers how he might fly to the upper regions, and they invented a novel plan. They suggested ordinary methods but the king would not hear of them.

They took four young eagles from a nest, fed and trained them until they were big and strong.

They made a square wooden frame; at each corner they fixed a pole and on each pole a piece of goat’s meat. One of the four eagles was tied to each corner.

The king’s throne was attached to the frame and a jar of wine was placed at the side of the throne. The king sat down.

The four eagles tried to catch hold of the meat and in order to do so flew upwards, at the same time lifting up the frame, which rose into the air to the amazement of the crowd. The eagles went up and up, nearer and nearer to the moon, until, wearied by their flight, they stopped beating their wings. Then the frame, the throne, the king, the wine-jar and all fell with a crash into the wilderness of China. The king lay all alone, bruised, hungry and wretched, until messengers came and took him back to the palace.

The king himself now saw how stupid and vain he had been. He decided not to attempt any more flights beyond his power. He settled down to the work of his kingdom and ruled it so justly that all men praised him.

This is how he came down from the high places of vanity to the honesty of the good, firm earth.

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Sometimes we feel contempt for vain people who not only admire themselves too much, but boast. No one likes a braggart; even braggarts despise braggarts.

We are not surprised to learn that Ravana the terrible foe of Rama, whose wife Sita he had stolen away, was a braggart; it was quite natural for such a monster.

In the last great battle between Rama and the demons of Lanka, the glorious lord stood in his chariot face to face with the demon king, also in his chariot. It was a single combat. The army of demons and the army of monkeys and bears watched the fight.

Then with a dreadful voice, Ravana the king of Lanka cried:

“Today, O Rama, this war will come to an end unless you save yourself by running away from the battlefield. Today, wretch, I shall give you over to death. It is with Ravana that you must fight.”

Rama smiled calmly. He knew that Ravana’s doom was near and he said:

“Yes, I have heard of all your might, O Ravana, but now I want to see as well as hear. I beg you to remember that there are three kinds of men in this world, who are like three kinds of trees: the dhak, the mango and the bread-fruit. The dhak tree bears flowers. It is like the man who only speaks. The mango tree has both flowers and fruits. It is like a man who both speaks and acts. The bread-fruit tree bears only fruit. It is like the man who speaks not but acts.”

The demon laughed at these wise words. But before long his boasting tongue was silent for ever.

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You have heard of great Solomon who was the King of Israel many years ago. There are many stories in the Bible and in other books which tell of his glory and his majesty. I shall tell you one story about him.

He was very rich. He had a magnificent throne, his plates were of gold, and in his palace silver was as common as stones in the city of Jerusalem. Merchants were constantly bringing him gold, silver, ivory, peacocks, monkeys, beautiful clothes, armour,

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spices, horses, mules and many other riches. King Solomon built a splendid temple in honour of the God of his fathers and his nation. But before the temple was built, while the timber for it was still growing in the form of cedar-trees on the mountains, Solomon had a dream in which his God appeared to him and said:

“Ask of me what you wish me to give you.”

Solomon answered:

“My father David was a just and truthful man and now I have succeeded to his throne. The work that lies before me is great. I feel like a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. I do not even know how to rule this people of which I am king. Therefore my desire is to have knowledge, so that I may know good from evil.”

And God replied:

“Because you have not asked for long life or riches but have desired knowledge and a heart which can distinguish justice from injustice, I will give you this wise mind so that none shall surpass you in understanding; and long life and riches will be yours also.”

You will notice the modest words spoken by the king, “I am but a little child.”

Do we think less of Solomon because he spoke humbly of himself?

On the contrary, it is a real joy to see greatness that is modest.

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I shall tell you three stories about the modesty of the Prophet Mohammed.

It is said that the Prophet of Islam was always willing to ride on an ass, while prouder men would only be content with a horse. And sometimes he would invite someone to ride behind him. And he would say:

“I sit at meals as servants do and I eat like a servant, for in truth I am a servant.”

Here is the second story. One day the Prophet was at a meeting-place where many people were gathered, and there was not much room to sit. So he sat with his legs folded under him.

An Arab of the desert was present, and knowing that Mohammed was a great leader of men, he was surprised that the Prophet was not seated like a lord upon a throne.

“Is this the way to sit?” he scoffed.

“Verily,” said Mohammed, “Allah has made me a humble servant and not a proud king.”

Here is the third story. Mohammed was deep in conversation with the chief of a tribe of Quraish, when a blind man named Abdullah, not knowing that someone was with the Prophet, suddenly interrupted the conversation and asked to hear some verses from the Koran.

Mohammed spoke to him very roughly and ordered him to be silent. But afterwards he felt sorry that he had been so harsh and very humbly apologised for it. And from that time he treated Abdullah with great respect and even conferred honorable posts on him.

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After these stories of the king and the prophet, I shall tell you one about a famous man of science, the Englishman Isaac Newton.

Newton was born in 1642 and died in 1727. In the course of his long life he studied Nature; the universal force of attraction called gravitation, the effect of the sun and the moon on the tides; the light of the sun and how its white ray is broken up into the seven colours of the rainbow; and many other things besides. Everyone marvelled at the wisdom of this man who was so skilled in reading the works and wonders of Nature. One day a lady spoke to Newton of his learning and knowledge and he replied:

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“Alas! I am only like a little child picking up pebbles on the shore of the great ocean of truth.”

You will understand that the ocean of truth means the laws of Nature which even the most learned men hardly know at all. A little child collects pebbles on the sea-shore, but how much vaster is the sea than the child thinks! And how much vaster still is the universe compared to our little thoughts!

And do we think less of Newton because he compared himself to a little child? Certainly not. We honour him for his modesty.

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Many years ago a great singer, who had won a world-wide reputation for her wonderful voice and outstanding talent, happened to be at a party. There, a little girl with a beautiful voice was asked to sing. The piece she was ready to sing was a duet, a piece of music for two voices. The child was to sing the main part, but no one wanted to sing the accompaniment. All the grown-ups thought that it was beneath them to sing the second voice to a child. There was a pause; no one offered to accompany the child.

Then the famous singer said:

“I will sing the second voice if you wish.”

And she did so. The duet was sung to the audience; the little girl’s voice rose high and clear, with the voice of the most famous singer of her time following sweetly, making a lovely harmony.

Noble was the heart of the modest lady who was willing to give her service to a child.

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In 1844 the Sanskrit College of Calcutta needed a teacher of grammar, and the post was offered to Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. At that time he was earning fifty rupees a month, and in this new

position he could earn ninety. But he thought that his friend Tarkavachaspati was a better grammar teacher than himself and he said so. So it was decided that his friend should take the post. Vidyasagar was very happy. He walked some distance from Calcutta to find his friend and tell him the news.

Tarkavachaspati was struck by the noble modesty of the scholar and exclaimed, "You are not a man, Vidyasagar, but a god in human form!"

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Now here is the story of a conceited glow-worm.

A man looked up at the glorious sun and exclaimed:

"How bright!"

"Like all the rest of us shining ones," answered a voice.

The man looked all around him and saw a glow-worm in the shade of a bush.

"Was it you who spoke?"

"Yes," replied the glow-worm. "I said that the sun and I are shining ones."

"The sun and you, really!" laughed the man.

"Yes, the sun, the moon, the stars, and me," insisted the glow-worm complacently.

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Four men were climbing a mountain in Italy. All four of them were monks: St. Francis was leading three brothers of his order. The mountain-side was covered with trees, and at the top there was an open flat space where St. Francis wished to pray, in the hope of having a new vision of things divine. The saint was well known and revered by rich lords and poor villagers alike.

The day was hot and the path steep. Francis was too tired to walk. So one of the monks went to a peasant and asked him to lend his ass for Francis to ride.

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The peasant willingly agreed; the saint mounted the ass and the monks walked by his side while the peasant followed behind.

“Tell me,” asked the peasant, “are you Brother Francis?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Then,” said the peasant, “try to be as good as people think you are, so that men may keep their faith in you.”

When he heard this, St. Francis was not at all displeased, for he would take advice from anyone, whether prince or poor peasant. He got down from the ass, bowed down before the countryman and thanked him for his good advice.