LUDWIG TIECK

THE BROTHERS

HERE lived near Bagdad, Omar and Mahmoud, two sons of poor parents. On their father's death they inherited only a small property; and each resolved to try to raise his fortune with it. Omar set forth to seek a place where to settle. Mahmoud repaired to Bagdad, began business in a small way, and soon increased his property. He lived very thriftily and retired, carefully adding each sequin to his capital, as the ground-work for some new plan of making money. He thus got into credit with several rich merchants, who sometimes assigned to him part of a ship's freight, and entered into speculations in common with him. With repeated good fortune Mahmoud grew bolder, ventured larger sums, and every time they brought him in a high interest. By degrees he became better known, his business extended, he had granted many heavy loans, had the money of many others in his hands, and fortune seemed constantly smiling. Omar, on the contrary, had been unfortunate, not one of all his ventures had been successful; he came, quite poor, and almost without clothes, to Bagdad, heard of his brother, and went to him to seek his aid. Mahmoud was rejoiced to see his brother again, though he deplored his poverty. Being very good-natured and sensitive, he immediately gave him a large sum out of his business, and with this money he at the same time established him in a shop. Omar began by dealing in silk goods and women's apparel, and fortune seemed more favourable to him in Bagdad: his brother had made him a present of the money, and so he had no occasion to worry himself about repayment. In all his undertakings he was less prudent than Mahmoud, and, for this very reason, more fortunate. He soon gained the acquaintance of some merchants, who till then had done business with Mahmoud, and he succeeded in making them his friends. By this his brother lost many a means of profit, which now fell to his lot. And Mahmoud too had just chosen a wife, who forced him into numerous expenses, which before that he had not had to make: he had to borrow of his acquaintances to pay debts; money which he was expecting failed to come in; his credit sank; and he was on the verge of despair, when news arrived that one of his ships had foundered, and nothing, not the least morsel of any thing, had been saved; at this moment a creditor appeared, pressingly demanding the payment of a debt. Mahmoud saw very clearly that his last hope of fortune depended on this payment; and he therefore resolved, in the greatest distress, to have recourse to his brother. He hastened to him, and found him very much out of sorts on account of a trifling loss which he had just undergone.

"Brother," began Mahmoud, "I come, in the utmost perplexity, to ask a favour of you."

Omar. Of what nature?

Mahmoud. My ship has gone to pieces; all my creditors are urgent, and will not hear of

delay; my whole happiness depends on this one day; do just lend me ten thousand sequins for a time.

Omar. Ten thousand sequins?—You're not talking nonsense, brother?

Mah. No, Omar, I know what that sum is very well; and just so much, and not one sequin less, can save me from the most disgraceful poverty.

Omar. Ten thousand sequins?

Mah. Give them to me, brother; I will do my utmost to return them to you in a short time.

Omar. Where are they to come from? I have much due to me that is still unpaid; I don't myself know what I am to do,—this very day I have been cheated of a hundred sequins.

Mah. Your credit will easily procure me this amount.

Omar. But not a soul will lend money now. There's mistrust on all sides; not that I am mistrustful, heaven knows, but every one would guess that I want the money for you; and you know best on what frail threads one's confidence in a merchant often hangs.

Mah. Dear Omar, I must confess I didn't expect these demurs from you. If we were to change sides, you would not find me so suspicious and dilatory.

Omar. So you say. I am not suspicious either; I wish I could help you. I call God to witness, how glad I should be.

Mah. You can, if you like.

Omar. All I have would not make the sum you require.

Mah. O heavens! I had reproached myself for not making my brother the first of whom I asked assistance; and I am truly sorry that I have burdened him with a single word.

Omar. You are angry; you are wrong in being so.

Mah. Wrong? which of us neglects his duty? Ah, brother, I don't know you!

Omar. I have just lost a hundred sequins to-day; another three hundred are not at all safe, and I must make up my mind to the loss of them. If you had but come to me last week,—oh, yes, then most heartily.

Mah. Must I then remind you of our former friendship? Ah! how low can misfortune

degrade us!

Omar. You talk, brother, almost as if you wished to insult me.

Mah. Insult you?

Omar. When one does all one can,—when one is in distress oneself, and in hourly fear of losing more,—can a man in such a case help being vexed when he receives nothing but bitter mockery and abject contempt for all his good-will?

Mah. Shew me your good-will, and you shall receive my warmest thanks.

Omar. Doubt of it no longer, or you will enrage me; I can keep cool a long time, and bear a good deal, but when I am irritated in such a deliberate way——

Mah. I see how it is, Omar; you play the insulted man, only to have a better excuse for breaking friends with me entirely.

Omar. You would never have thought of such a thing, if you were not caught in such paltry tricks yourself. We are most prone to suspect others of those vices with which we are most familiar ourselves.

Mah. No, Omar;—but since such language as yours encourages me to boast,—I must say, I didn't act so towards you, when you came, a poor stranger, to Bagdad.

Omar. And so for the five hundred sequins which you then gave me, you want ten thousand from me now.

Mah. Had I been able, I would gladly have given you more.

Omar. To be sure, if you wish it, I must return you the five hundred sequins, though you can shew no claim to them by law.

Mah. Ah, brother!

Omar. I will send them to you:—are you expecting no letters from Persia?

Mah. I have nothing more to expect.

Omar. To be frank with you, brother; you should have lived a little more closely, and not have married either, just as I have kept from it to this very hour; but from your childhood you were always somewhat indiscreet, so let this serve as a warning to you.

Mah. You had a right to refuse me the favour I requested of you, but not to make me

such bitter reproaches into the bargain.

Mahmoud's heart was deeply touched, and he left his ungrateful brother. "And is it then true," cried he, "that covetousness only is the soul of men? Their own selves are their first and last thought! For money they barter truth and love; do violence to the most beautiful feelings, to gain possession of the sordid metal that fetters us to the grovelling earth in its disgraceful chains! Self-interest is the rock on which all friendship is shivered. Men are an abandoned race. I have never known a friend nor a brother; and my only intercourse has been with men of trade. Fool that I was to speak to them of love and friendship! Money only it is that one must change and exchange for them."

Returning home, he took a circuitous path, in order to let his painful emotions subside. He wept at the sight of the noisy market-throng; every one was as busy as an ant in carrying stores into his dingy dwelling; no one cared for the other, unless induced by a sense of profit; all were hurrying this way and that, as insensible as ciphers. He went home disconsolate.

There his grief was heightened; he found the five hundred sequins, which he had once given with the greatest good-will to his brother; they were soon the prey of his creditors. All he possessed was publicly sold; one of his ships came into port, but the cargo only served to pay the remainder of his debts. Poor as a beggar, he left the town without even passing by his hard-hearted brother's house.

His wife accompanied him in his misery, comforting him, and seeking to dissipate his grief, but she succeeded very poorly. The remembrance of his misfortune was still too fresh in Mahmoud's mind; still he saw before him the towers of the town where the brother dwelt who had remained so cold and unmoved by his distress.

Omar made no inquiries after his brother, that he might have no occasion to compassionate him; he fancied, too, all might after all have passed off well. In the mean time his credit had suffered in some measure on his brother's account; people began to be mistrustful towards him, and several merchants were less ready than formerly in entrusting him with their money. In addition to this, Omar grew very miserly, and proud of the fortune he had amassed; so that he made many enemies, who took pleasure in any loss that he might suffer.

It seemed as if destiny were determined to punish his ingratitude towards his brother; for loss after loss followed in quick succession. Omar, who was all anxiety to recover these losses, hazarded larger sums, and these too were swallowed up. He ceased to pay the money which he owed; mistrust of him became general; all his creditors pressed him at the same time; Omar knew no one who could assist him in this crisis of perplexity. He saw no other resource left him, than clandestinely to quit the town by night, and to try if fortune would be more favourable to him in another quarter.

The small property which he had been enabled to take with him was soon exhausted. His disquietude increased exactly as his money waned; he saw before him the most abject poverty, and yet no means of escaping it.

Full of pensive thoughts and lamentations, he in this state reached the Persian frontier. He had now spent all his money, except three small coins, which just sufficed to pay for a supper in a caravanserai; he felt hungry, and as the sun was already declining, he hastened his steps, in order to reach some place of shelter, where for that night, and perhaps for the last one, he might lodge once more.

"How wretched I am!" said he to himself. "How does fate pursue me, and claim me in my misery! What a frightful prospect lies open before me! I shall be obliged to live on the alms of compassionate souls, to bear contemptuous repulse, not dare to murmur when the profligate stalks unabashed by, without deigning to give me a glance, and then squanders a hundred gold pieces on some miserable toy. O poverty, how thou canst debase mankind! How partially and unfairly does fortune dispense her treasures! She pours the whole tide of her wealth on the vicious, and lets the virtuous perish of hunger."

The rocks that Omar surmounted made him tired; he sat down to rest upon a bank of turf by the road-side. There a beggar on crutches came hobbling past him, murmuring an unintelligible prayer. He was tattered and famished, his burning eyes lay deep in his head, and his pale form was enough to cut one to the heart, and compel one to pity. Omar's attention was drawn, against his will, to this object of abhorrence, that murmured still, and stretched forth his arid hand. He asked the beggar's name, and then, for the first time, remarked that the unhappy creature was both deaf and dumb.

"Oh! how indescribably happy I am!" cried he; "and do I still lament? Why can I not labour? why not satisfy my wants by the work of my hands? How glad, how happy would this miserable object be to exchange with me! I am ungrateful towards Heaven."

Seized with a sudden impulse of compassion, he took his last pieces of silver out of his pocket, and gave them to the beggar, who, after a mute expression of thanks, pursued his way.

Omar now felt extraordinarily light-hearted and cheerful; the Deity had, for his instruction, held a picture as it were before him of the misery to which man may sink. He now felt power enough within him to bear with poverty, or by activity to cast it off. He made plans for his sustenance, and only wished he could at once have an opportunity of shewing how industrious he could be. Since his noble-minded compassion for the beggar, and the generosity with which he had sacrificed to him his whole remaining stock of money, he had had sensations such as he had never known before.

A steep rock abutted on the road, and Omar ascended it with a light heart, to take a view of the country, made still more lovely by the setting sun. Here he saw, lying at his feet, the beautiful world, with its green plains and majestic hills, its dark forests, and brightly-blushing rivers, and over all this the golden web-work of the crimson evening; and he felt like a prince who ruled over the whole, and put forth his power over hill, and wood, and stream.

He continued sitting on the peak of the rock, absorbed in the contemplation of the landscape. He resolved to await there the rising of the moon, and then to continue his journey.

The crimson of evening vanished, and twilight dropped from the clouds: the dark night followed. The stars twinkled in the dark blue vault, and earth silently reposed in solemn quiet. Omar gazed fixedly on the night, till his eye wandered dizzily among the countless stars; he supplicated the majesty of God, and felt a holy awe thrill through his soul.

Then it seemed that a beam of light arose in the distant horizon; it ascended in blue coruscation, and passed as a shining flame to the zenith of heaven. The stars retreated palely, and, like the light of new-born morning, it flickered over the firmament, and rained down in softly tinted beams of crimson. Omar was astonished by the wondrous phenomenon, and feasted his eye on the beauteous and unusual gleam; the forests and hills around him sparkled, the distant clouds floated in pale purple, and the radiance of the whole converged into a vault of gold over Omar.

"Hail, noble, compassionate, virtuous one!" cried a sweet voice from above; "thou takest pity on misery, and the Lord looks down on thee with well-pleased approval."

Like dying flute-tones, the night-winds whispered round Omar; his bosom heaved happily and pantingly, his eye was drunk with splendour, his ear with heavenly harmony; and from amid the effulgence stepped forth a form of light, and stood before the enraptured one; it was Asrael, the radiant angel of God.

"Mount with me in these beams to the abodes of the blessed," cried the same sweet voice, "for thou hast deserved by thy nobleness of soul to view the blessedness of Paradise."

"My Lord," said the trembling Omar, "how can I, a mortal, follow thee? My earthly body is not taken from me yet."

"Give me thy hand," said the form of light. Omar tendered him it with trembling rapture, and they soared through the clouds on the crimson beams. They traversed the stars, and sweet sounds waited on their steps, and the blush of morning lay in ambush

in their path, and the fragrance of flowers filled the air with aroma.

Of a sudden it was night. Omar shrieked aloud, and found himself lying at the foot of the crag, with shattered arms. The dark red moon just rose from behind a hill, casting its first doubtful gleams on the rocky valley.

"Oh, thrice-wretched me!" cried Omar lamentingly, on recovering his senses. "Was Heaven so little satisfied with my misery that it must dash me in a false dream from the peak of the rock, and shatter my limbs, that I might become the prey of hunger? Is it thus that it compensates my pity for the unfortunate? Oh, who was ever unhappier than I?"

A figure shuffled past him with pain, and Omar recognised him to be the beggar to whom he that very day had given the remainder of his money. Omar called out to him, and besought him in a pitiful strain to share with him the benefaction which he himself had bestowed, but the cripple went heedlessly gasping on his way; so that Omar did not know whether he had heard him, or was only dissembling, that he might seem to have a right to disregard him.

"Am I not more wretched than this outcast?" said Omar, lamenting amid the stillness of night. "Who will take pity on me, now that all is taken from me that could comfort me?"

He fetched a deep sigh, his arms pained him, a burning fire raged in his bones, and every breath was drawn in torture. Now he took a review of his fortune, and, for the first time, thought once more on his brother.

"Oh, where art thou, noble-minded one?" cried he; "perhaps the sword of the angel of death has already smitten thee; misery perhaps has consumed thee in the most wearing poverty, and thou hast cursed thy poor brother in the last hour of anguish. Ah! I have deserved this at thy hands; now do I suffer the penalty of my ingratitude, my hard-heartedness! Heaven is just!—And I too could stalk along so proudly, and call on God to witness my virtue! O Heaven, forgive the sinner who, without a murmur, bows to thy chastisement."

Omar buried himself in pensive thoughts; he remembered with what brotherly love Mahmoud had received him when, for the first time, he was destitute; he reproached himself for having neglected to save him, and for not having repaid by that means his debt of gratitude: he longed for death, as the term of his penalty and his sufferings.

The moon shone brightly over the landscape, and a small caravan, consisting of a few camels, wound slowly through the vale. The lust of life again awoke in Omar; he cried out for aid to the passers-by, in a voice of wailing. They laid him carefully on a camel, that they might have his wounds bound up in the next town, which they reached by

break of day. The merchant attended the unfortunate man himself, and Omar recognised in him—his brother. His sense of shame knew no bounds, as neither did the compassion of Mahmoud. The one brother begged for pardon, and the other had already forgiven; tears flowed down the cheeks of each, and the most touching reconciliation was solemnised between them.

Mahmoud had repaired to Ispahan after his impoverishment, and had there made the acquaintance of a rich old merchant, who soon grew fond of him, and assisted him with money. Fortune was favourable to the exile, and in a short period he recovered his lost wealth. At this moment his old benefactor died, making him his heir.

On his recovery, Omar travelled with his brother to Ispahan, where the latter set him up anew in business. Omar married, and never forgot how much he owed to his brother; and from that time forward both lived in the strictest concord, and afforded the whole town a pattern of brotherly love.