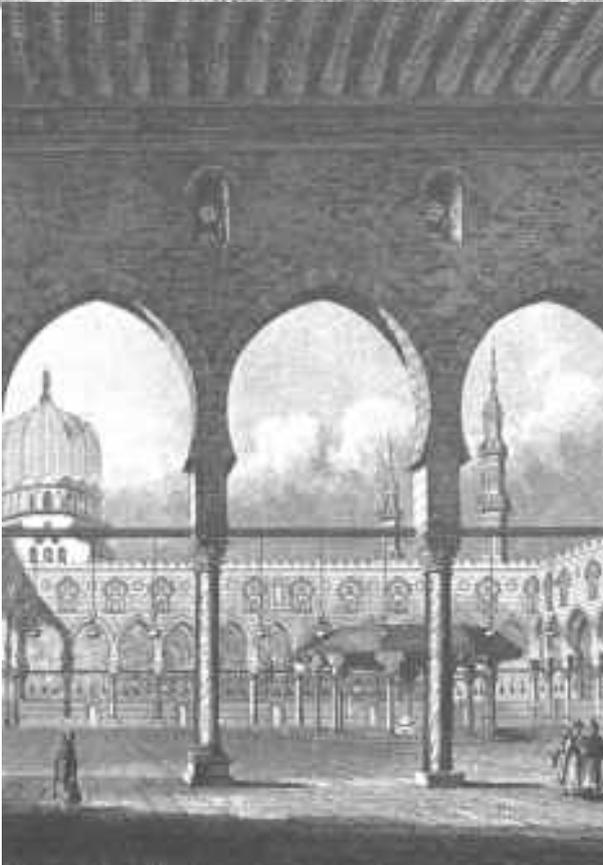


THE CENTREFOLD STORY

The King and the Fisherman

A Persian fairy tale

Illustrating the advantage of being able to formulate a judicious reply to an embarrassing question, especially when material plenitude may ensue.



The countries washed by the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates were once ruled by a certain King who was passionately fond of fish.

He was seated one day with Sherem, his wife, in the royal gardens that stretch down to the banks of the Tigris, at the point where it is spanned by the wonderful bridge of boats; and looking up spied a boat gliding by, in which was seated a fisherman having a large fish.

Noticing that the King was looking closely at him, and knowing how much the King liked this particular kind of fish, the fisherman made his obeisance, and skilfully bringing his boat to the shore, came before the King and begged that he would accept the fish as a present. The King was greatly pleased at this, and ordered that a large sum of money be given to the fisherman. But before the fisherman had left the royal presence, the Queen turned towards the King and said: "You have done a foolish thing." The King was astonished to hear her speak in this way, and asked how that could be.

The Queen replied: "The news of your having given so large a reward for so small a gift will spread through the city and it will be known as the fisherman's gift. Every fisherman who catches a big fish will bring it to the palace, and should he not be paid in like manner, he will go away discontented, and secretly speak evil of you among his fellows."

"Thou speakest the truth, light of my eyes," said the King, "but can not you see how mean it would be for a King, if for that reason he were to take back his gift?" Then perceiving that the Queen was ready to argue the matter, he turned away angrily, saying: "The matter is closed."

However, later in the day, when he was in a more amiable frame of mind, the Queen again approached him, and said that if that was his



only reason for not taking back his gift, she would arrange it.

"You must summon the fisherman," she said, "and then ask him, 'Is this fish male or female?' If he says male, then you will tell him that you wanted a female fish; but if he should say female, your reply will be that you wanted a male fish. In this way the matter will be properly adjusted."

The King thought this an easy way out of the difficulty, and commanded the fisherman to be brought before him. When the fisherman who, by the way, was a most intelligent man, stood before the King, the King said to him: "O fisherman, tell me, is this fish male or female?"

The fisherman replied, "The fish is neither male nor female." Whereupon the King smiled at the clever answer, and to add to the Queen's annoyance, directed the keeper of the royal purse to give the fisherman a further sum of money.

Then the fisherman placed the money in his leather bag, thanked the King, and swinging the bag over his shoulder, hurried away, but not so quickly that he did not notice that he had dropped one small coin. Placing the bag on the ground, he stooped and picked up the coin, and again went on his way, with the King and Queen carefully watching his every action.

"Look! what a miser he is!" said Sherem, triumphantly. "He actually put down his bag to pick up one small coin because it grieved him to think that it might reach the hands of one of the King's servants, or some poor person, who, needing it, would buy bread and pray for the long life of the King."

"Again thou speakest the truth," replied the King, feeling the justice of this remark; and once more was the fisherman brought into the royal presence.

"Are you a human being or a beast?" the King asked him. "Although I made it possible for you to become rich without toil, yet the miser within you could not allow you to leave even one small piece of money for others." Then the King bade him to go forth and show his face no more within the city.

At this the fisherman fell on his knees and cried: "Hear me, O King, protector of the poor! May God grant the King a long life. Not for its value did thy servant pick up the coin, but because on one side it bore the name of God, and on the other the likeness of the King. Thy servant feared that someone, not seeing the coin, would tread it into the dirt, and thus defile both the name of God and the face of the King. Let the King judge if by so doing I have merited reproach."

This answer pleased the King beyond all measure, and he gave the fisherman another large sum of money. And the Queen's wrath was turned away, and she looked kindly upon the fisherman as he departed with his bag laden with money.