

KING BAULAH.

THE EGYPTIAN VERSION OF THE STORY OF KING JOHN
AND THE ABBOT OF CANTERBURY.

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THIS Egyptian story, which has never before been published, is taken from the Arabic *Futūh Misr*, or "Conquest of Egypt," written by one of the very earliest of the Moslem historians, Ibn 'Abd el-Hakem, who died in Egypt in the year 871 A. D. The king of whom it is told is identified in the Arabic histories with Pharaoh Necho II., who defeated King Josiah of Judah, and put the land of Palestine under tribute (2 Kings xxiii. 29-35). His name is given by the historians in several forms, the difference being generally due to the variation of a single diacritical point. The most common form is Naulah; but in the manuscripts of the "Conquest of Egypt" the spelling Baulah is given. It is said of this king that he reached such a height of power and glory as no one of his predecessors had attained, since the time of Rameses II. But he was exceedingly wicked, as well as tyrannical, and made himself detested by his people. The following account of the way in which his reign came to an end was current in Egypt at the time of the Mohammedan conquest, but seems to have been preserved only in the *Futūh Misr*.

Here is a literal translation :

"One day, he [King Baulah] summoned his vezirs before him and said to them : 'I will ask of you certain questions. If you can answer them for me, I will add to your pay and increase your power; but if you fail to answer them, I will cut off your heads.' They replied: 'Ask of us whatever you will.' So he said: 'Tell me these three things: *first*, what is the number of the stars in the heavens? *Second*, what sum of money does the sun earn daily by

his labor for mankind? *Third*, what does God Almighty do every day?' Not knowing what to answer, the vezirs besought the king to give them a little time; and he granted them a month's respite.

"They used therefore to go every day outside the city of Memphis and stand in the shade of a potter's kiln; where they would consult together in hope of finding a solution of the difficulty they were in. The potter, observing this, came to them one day and asked them what they were doing. They told him their story. He replied: '*I* can answer the king's questions; but I have a kiln here and cannot afford to leave it idle. Let one of you sit down and work in my place; and do you give me one of your beasts to ride on, and furnish me with clothing like your own.' They did as he asked.

"Now there was in the city a certain prince, the son of a former king, whom ill fortune had overtaken. To him the potter betook himself, and proposed to him that he should try to regain his father's throne. But he replied: 'There is no way of getting this fellow (meaning the king) outside of the city.' 'I will get him out for you,' answered the potter. So the prince collected all his resources, and made his preparations.

"Then the potter, in the guise of a vezir, went and stood before King Baulah, and announced himself ready to answer the three questions. 'Tell me, then,' said the king, 'the number of the stars in the sky.' The potter produced a bag of sand which he had brought, and poured it out before him, saying: 'Here is just the number.' 'How do you know?' demanded the king. 'Order some one to count it, and you will see that I have it right.' The king proceeded: 'How much does the sun earn every day by his work for each son of Adam?' He replied: 'One kirat; for the day-laborer who works from sunrise to sunset receives that amount.' The king then asked: 'What does God Almighty do every day?' 'That,' answered the potter, 'I will show you to-morrow.'

"So on the morrow he went forth with him from the city until they came to that one of the king's vezirs whom the potter had made to sit down in his place. Then he said: 'What God Almighty does every day is this; he humbles men, and exalts men, and ends the life of men. To illustrate this: Here is one of your own vezirs sitting down to work in a potter's kiln; while I, a poor potter, am mounted on one of the royal beasts and wear the royal livery. And further: such a one (naming the rival prince) has just barred the gates of Memphis against you.'

"The king turned back in hot haste; but lo! the gates of the

city were already barred. Then the people, led by the young prince, seized King Baulah and deposed him. He became insane, and used to sit by the gate of the city of Memphis, raving and drivelling.

“And that [adds the narrator] is the reason why a Copt, when you say to him anything that displeases him, replies: ‘You are descended from Baulah on both sides of your family!’ meaning the insane king.”

An especially interesting feature of this Egyptian story is the close resemblance which it bears to a certain well-known popular tale, current in almost all parts of Europe from the latter half of the Middle Ages onward, and best known to English readers in the form of the ballad of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury. In the latter, King John is introduced as a powerful, but unjust, ruler who

“. . . ruled England with maine and with might,
For he did great wrong, and maintain'd little right.”

He decides that his Abbot of Canterbury is much too rich and prosperous, and announces his intention to cut off his head; but finally agrees to spare his life on condition of his answering three questions which the King propounds. The questions are: (1) How much am I, the King, worth? (2) How long would it take me to ride around the earth? (3) What am I thinking? The Abbot regards himself as a dead man, but is finally rescued by a shepherd, who goes to the King disguised as the Abbot, and answers the three questions without difficulty. The King is worth twenty-nine pence; since Jesus Christ was valued at thirty. The ride around the earth can be accomplished in just one day, by keeping directly under the sun for that length of time. The answer to the third question turns on the fact of the shepherd's disguise: what the King “thinks” is this, that the man speaking to him is the Abbot of Canterbury, but he is in reality only a poor shepherd.

Thus the old English tale, with which the various European versions, already mentioned, substantially agree.¹

As for the relation which all these bear to one another, and to the Egyptian legend of King Baulah, it seems almost certain that we have here a striking example of the migration of a popular tale. The evidence for this conclusion is found not only in the fact of substantial identity, extending in one or two cases even to unnecessary details, but also in an interesting fact bearing on the

¹ See the Introduction to the ballad of King John and Abbot, in Child's *English and Scottish Ballads*.

question of the way in which the tale may have travelled from Egypt to Europe. The *Futūh Misr* of Ibn 'Abd el-Hakem contains one of the oldest and most interesting narratives of the Mohammedan conquest of Spain; and this history was therefore one of those best known among the Spanish Arabs, from the ninth century on. We may conclude, therefore, with some confidence, that the Coptic-Arabic tale of the King and the Potter, having been brought to Spain in the *Futūh Misr*, soon became a part of the native folklore; and that it then made its way, by oral and literary transmission, into France, England, Italy, Germany, and Denmark.

Another is thus added to the list of those folk tales which, in more or less altered form, have made their way from the East into Western lands. The extent to which these Oriental treasures were imported in the Middle Ages, especially after the Moslem conquest of Spain and during the Crusades, is well known. See, for example, the interesting article, "Die Märchen der tausend und



einen Nacht," by the late Prof. August Müller, in the *Deutsche Rundschau* for July, 1887. Egypt, it may be noted, has furnished a goodly share of this material. The Egyptians, from the earliest times, were a people gifted with strong imagination, and a keen sense of humor. Some faint idea of what they were capable of producing, in the field of imaginative fiction, may be gained from Maspero's *Contes populaires de l'Égypte ancienne*, 1882; Flinders Petrie's *Egyptian Tales*, 1895; or from Spiegelberg's excellent little pamphlet, *Die Novelle im alten Aegypten*, Strassburg, 1898. Almost every new discovery of papyrus rolls adds to the store of interesting popular anecdotes which have a startlingly modern sound; and on some of the old monuments are found amusing caricatures which would do credit to the *Fliegende Blätter*. It is in every way probable that the story of King Baulah, though we are not now able to trace it farther back than the Copts of the seventh century A. D., was in reality current in the land many centuries before Christ.