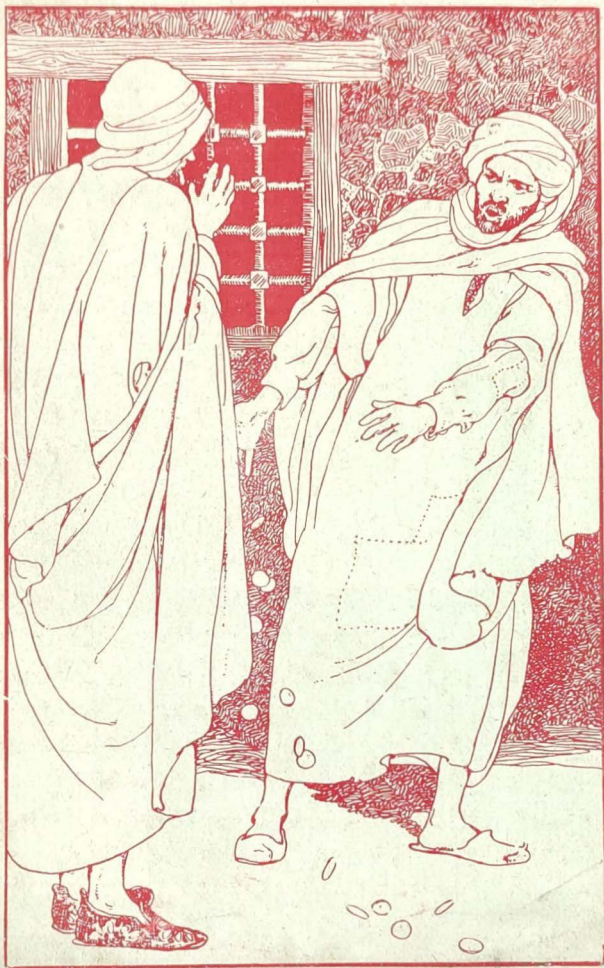


THE DEBT OF ALI BEN OMAR.



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Dear reader, listen to this story.

Some time ago, there lived a man named Ali ben Omar, who left his country—which was on a table-land—and went to live by the sea in order to seek work, taking his family with him. This man had a little shop in his country, but there was no profit in it, and he had become nearly bankrupt. He sold his little shop to pay the price of his journey, and departed. When he reached the coast, he had only two douros* in his pocket, but he was not afraid, for people had told him that there was plenty of work to be had there. Then he rented a room at two douros a month, paid the deposit, placed his goods in it, and began to look for work. But he did not find work, and little by little he spent the two douros that remained to him to give food to his family, and after this he did not possess a sou to pay his rent; moreover he was not accustomed to hard work, and was rather idle.

* A douro is five francs.

The first and second months passed, and at the beginning of the third month the owner of the room came to him and said, "My brother, as you have given me only one franc as deposit for the rent of your room, you must find the money to pay me the rest, for you owe me four douros all but a franc." Ali said, "Master, times have been straitened with me—I beseech you to have patience with me a little." The master consented and waited until the third month had passed. Ali ben Omar again sought for work but did not find any, and that month added two douros to his debt. In the beginning of the fourth month the owner of the room returned again, and said to him, "Ali, pay me what you owe.†" Then Ali ben Omar was ashamed, and said to him, "Oh Sir, I have heard the people say that you are a generous and merciful man: if you will forgive me the past three months, God willing, from now onward I will begin to pay you." The master replied, "It is true that I am a generous and merciful man, but if it had not been so I should not have had such long patience with you: but I am also a just

† It is the rule in Algiers that on the sixth day of the feast, all debts for rent have to be paid up, under pain of expulsion.

man and must keep my word, and you must pay your debt, for future payments will not cover the past debt. Be advised not to let your debt continually mount up.” After these words the owner of the room went out. The month of Shabane passed and Ramadhan came, and Ali ben Omar did not find the wherewithal to break his fast, and when the cannon sounded he had nothing to satisfy his hunger excepting dry bread, and still he found no way to pay the rent of his room. Ramadhan passed, and the little Feast, and Jeleb came; and at that time he began to be greatly afraid, for he knew that in the Great Feast the owner of the room would certainly come, and if he did not give him the rent, he would without doubt, take his furniture and cast him into the street.

The Great Feast came, and Ali had no sheep to slay and no suitable garment with which to clothe himself. He went from friend to friend asking help, but every one said to him, “Brother, we and you are in the same plight, we cannot give or lend you what we do not possess, for we are debtors like yourself, and we are waiting for whatever is to befall us.” The fifth day of the feast came and

Ali ben Omar knew that the next day would be the last. That day he fasted, bowed his head between his hands and remained plunged in thought, meditating on the hour of reckoning. In the evening, hearing a knock at the door, Ali arose to open it, and behold before him stood the son of the owner, whose name was Si Abderrahman, a tall and handsome man. Ali ben Omar's heart was so full of anger and hate that he did not wish to see Si Abderrahman. But Si Abderrahman came near to him, and gently holding out his hand, said to him, "My brother, I have not come to reproach you, but to bring you good news. My father and I have seen your poverty, and we are sorry for you because you are so far from your country. It is true that my father is a just man and so must keep his word, and therefore cannot excuse you, but he has given me liberty to sell for your sake a possession in the mountains that is an inheritance of mine. I have sold it and here is the money that it has brought me, fourteen douros which is the exact amount that you owe to my father; take it, for I give it to you, and to-morrow morning, do not be afraid to go and take it to my father, and God be with you." But instead

of thanking the son of the master, Ali ben Omar looked on him with disdain, and proudly answered, "Sir, I have nothing to do with you, and I do not need your help; when I see your father to-morrow I shall look after myself: take your money and go." Throwing the money towards Si Abderrahman, he showed him to the door. Si Abderrahman remained silent, and looking on Ali with sorrow, quietly departed.

At mid-day the following day, the master of the house himself came; and when Ali ben Omar saw him he threw himself at his feet, and said. "Have pity upon me, O master, have pity upon me." The master of the room said to him, "Last night I sent mercy and pardon to you by my son, and you would not accept them. Your opportunity is now passed, I have no other mercy by which to have mercy on you." Ali could not answer him. That very hour he was turned into the street, and the door was closed and locked behind him. He begged from door to door, and went from town to town asking help, till the day when he fell ill through cold and hunger, and died of want far from his people and his friends.

THE INTERPRETATION.

You, reader, are like Ali ben Omar. From the time when you first understood the difference between good and evil, your debt has mounted up before God ; for often you have done things which God forbids, and neglected the things which He has demanded of you. From time to time you have made good resolutions not to do wrong, and have thought that by so doing, your debt will be wiped out. But you are mistaken, for good resolves for the future can never pay for the sins of the past. You have sought the aid of the prophets—peace be upon them—but the prophets were men like yourself and they cannot help you in the payment of your debt, for every one of us must give an account of himself to God. God sees that you have no way to pay the debt of your sins, and He knows that the day of reckoning is near ; and for this cause He has had mercy on you and has sent you a way of escape. Jesus the Messiah, He it is Who brings this good and wonderful news. This Jesus is the Son of Mary according to the flesh, and the Son of God according to the Spirit.

It is Jesus Who has come to make reconciliation between you and God. He gave up the inheritance of His glory when He left the heavens to

come down on the earth, and again He gave up the inheritance of His life when He died for you on the Cross, and thus He purchased for you God's pardon, and to-day He is offering you this wonderful pardon.

Dear reader, if you have not yet understood this mercy of God by the hand of Jesus the Messiah, you are like Ali ben Omar before Si Abderrahman came to him, and your state is the same as his, because the debt of your sin is growing day by day, and the day of reckoning is nearing you. Be careful that you do not act like Ali, in adding to your sins the greatest sin of all, in that you do not receive the good news of reconciliation which God sends you. Be careful that you do not refuse Jesus the Messiah, Who desires to save you, and that this great sin is not on you when you appear before God in the day of judgment.

The words that are written in the Gospel are these. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. To-day if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

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