

The Beggar King
Shoshanah bas Nachman

a Talmudic tale set in the style of
Sir Gawain and the Grene Knyght

Jerusalem he ruled, richly and righteous:
Solomon Sophont, salient in service,
adjudged for his justice a giant of Jewry.
Valuable visions devolved to his valor.
Demons he dominated; deeds they did him.
Ashmedai Arch-demon came at his order,
chained with enchanted steel, strong and well-chosen,
embodied and bound with the Name of the Blessed.
The Seal of Solomon, that circlet of safety,
graven in gold the Name of the Greatest,
formed on the finger of this fiercest of kings
to sear:

a terrible tool to tame
demons dread and drear:
the awful ineffable Name
that all who feel must fear.

His minister mentioned with mystified mien
deeds that were done by the deadly demon,
encounters on the course he had to the king,
from hellish home to high court hied.
A blindman beggar blundered and bobbed,
stumbled his steps, stunned and stopping.
Ashmedai aimed the ailing steps honestly,
guiding the goodman, regaining his goal.
A magician cajoled them, jovial, joyously
boasting of bounty his craft could them bring.
With leering laughter that liege of darkness
scolded and scattered the scandalous school.

To spout:

the demon's daring deeds
with tales to tattle and tout
aligns and loosely leads

with queries, questions, and doubt.

Solomon summoned that subtlest of demons
to his court to recount his curious conduct:
Why and wherefore, whither and whence
came Ashmedai's actions, antics, and aims?
"O king who has care for kith and your kin,
know, by my nature and nurture, knowledge I have
of much that for Men is murky, unmarked.
The beggar who blindly blundered and bobbed
has virtue invisible, vital, and visionary:
Even deathless demons adore his destiny,
the Highest to hold him whole and hale.
That braggart, the bold one, is blind to his bounty:
Lost and unlooked for, 'neath where he lives,
lies treasure untrammelled, untold, and untaken.

No lie:

What Heaven has held as hidden
from Man's own ear and eye
is bared to me, as bidden
by He Who holds on High."

Solomon silently sank in his thought.
Then adjuring the demon, dauntless and daring:
"By my ring that is wrought with the Name of the Righteous,
tell me in truth, o tireless tyrant:
How can you help me, what hope can you heave,
to tell and detect, distinguish and tally,
illusions and lies, the lost and the liminal,
from the real, the richness, the righteous enwreathed
in this world, this wonder the Highest doth wield?

To sing:

Obey, o bound and bidden,
by rite of Name and ring:
Unhide what here is hidden!
I conjure, I call—the king."

“O king, this I can: I shall do as requested;
but to achieve your chore, these chains enchanted
removed and remain from my body, I mandate.
And I need your renowned ring of the Name
to hold in my hand to help with your hope.
Nor aught, nor any, without what I ask for!”
Solomon consulted, sought out his counsel:
Grandly yet gravely he gave his agreement.
“Loose the limbs of this lithe-speaking light-tongue.
By this ring do I rule, thou shalt reach and arrive
at this bargain I bid thee to bring to my benefit.
So seal I thy service in sight of all souls.”

Let stand:

That royal and righteous ring,
that beautiful blessed band
of the courtly, kindly king
now held in that hideous hand!

The fiery fortune enfolded in fist
he flung with fury o'er firmament: It flew!
In sooth, it soon sailed out of sight to the south.
Then, laying his limbs on that leonine liege,
heaving and hauling him high in the air,
o'er land, o'er light he launched the king!
Solomon soared beyond sound and sight.
Nigh into night he gnawed to the north,
tumbled and tossed in that terrible trip.

In lore:

Furiously forth he flew,
in a senseless swoon did soar,
then blundered blind from the blue,
nodded, and knew no more.

Staring in stupor, Solomon stood:
Unhurt and unharmed, but helpless and hapless,
bereft of his riches and royal robes,
arriving in rags, no realm to rule,
no power, no potency, importance, or privilege.
Bound to beg his bread abroad:
a crownless king, no cares to keep.

With zeal:

He went his wand'ring way,
merry with meat or meal,
doing deeds by day
that won him woe or weal.

Homeless he hobbled from hamlet to hearth,
stopping nor staying in steading or stile.
He wandered and wended his wondering way
to a seething city of assorted souls.
The king of this country Ammon was called.
There bobbed one bearing bundles of bread,
too many, too much for the man to manage.
Solomon hurried and hollered, "Ho, there! I'll help you!"
Ammon's baker and butler, this bright-eyed bumbler!
In sooth Ammon's supper by Solomon saved.
Gracious in gratitude, the king granted and gave
Solomon safety, assigned to his staff.

Repeat:

The kindly courteous king
had all he ever could eat.
And Solomon's service did sing,
good fortune had followed his feet.

Solomon soon was consulted and sought
by the king and the court for his clear-sighted kenning:
For all who had eye or ear to ask,
he answered them aye with honor and honesty.
Ammon's daughter there dwelt, nigh to adult,
doted on daily; no dam in the domicile.
The daughter, with deeds daring and dauntless,
saw in Solomon a stalwart to savor.
Love then enlivened her lissome limbs,
and forward to Father she furthered her feelings.
Marriage she meant to this mighty mendicant,
her sparkling spirit speaking unsparingly.

Indeed:

Serious, soulful, and sad—
how rightly this riddle to read?
Furious, her father forbade
this deadly, dangerous deed.

Dauntless, the daughter dared her doom,
defying her father, family and fortune.
“Obey or be banished!” Ammon blustered and boomed.
But, sadly, no solace, nor Solomon solving
the quickening quarrel 'twixt king and his kin.
The two of them, tragically, torn away, traveled
away to a woeful and windy wilderness.
Together they gathered greens by a river,
hoping a home they could hew from this happenstance.

Let stand:

Tirelessly toiled the two
with hope and heart and hand.
Gradually greenery grew:
They labored and loved on the land.

They toiled tirelessly all day in the tith.
The years yielded them all that they yearned for:
Fodder and food for all of the family,
three babes that were born, then bred in their homestead:
a brace of boys and a girl most beautiful.
Their home, first a hut, then a happy house.
The river land, rich, began to ripen.
Fertile fields brought friendly faces,
the weather warm and always welcoming.
Solomon's Settlement succored the valley.

Whereof:

Living a holy life
alongside those we love,
spared from sorrow and strife:
Blessed by the Name Above.

Hard-pressed, yet happy, blessed by the Highest,
well-fed and fruitful was Solomon's family.
But darkling doom yet drove to their door:
With rapid rains the river arose,
and a furious flood whelmed over the family.
Solomon swam, saving the boys,
while his daughter, adrift, with his wife went down.
Then waves overwhelmed him, weakening his arms,
and Solomon's sons were gone of a-sudden.

With weight:

O mighty but mortal man:
We love too little, too late!
No power can possibly plan
for the fiendish fury of fate.

Solomon slowly stirred from the storm,
half-drowned by the deluge and driving rain,
sodden and soaked down to his skin.
Sobbing in sorrow, no solace to hand,
he clambered and climbed up the bank of clay,
eying in agony everything awful.
Then a fish he found flopping in front of his face:
he grabbed for and grasped the scales of gold.
In its mouth he remarked a thing that amazed:
the ring of his royal, most regal state,
bearing in boldness the Name of the Brightest!
In a flash on his finger its true place it found.
And Lo! — There he looked on his loyal court,
watching him, waiting for him to be ware of them.
His clothes were all clean, his head bore his crown;
no time had it taken, his troubles and toil!
And daring, undaunted, there stood the demon.
“O king, have you cleaved the divide most cunning
'twixt light and illusion, the real and liminal?”
Thus Ashmedai answered Solomon's orders
and flew off to freedom, with fright in his wake.

So strong:

Solomon's subsequent rule
was famed in fable and song,
his justice a jubilant jewel,
his life illumined and long.