**A Bird of Bagdad**

O. Henry

Without a doubt much of the spirit and genius of the Caliph Harun Al Rashid descended to the Margrave August Michael von Paulsen Quigg.

Quigg’s restaurant is in Fourth Avenue—that street that the city seems to have forgotten in its growth. Fourth Avenue-born and bred in the Bowery-staggers northward full of good resolutions.

Where it crosses Fourteenth Street it struts for a brief moment proudly in the glare of the museums and cheap theatres. It may yet become a fit mate for its high-born sister boulevard to the west, or its roaring, polyglot, broad-waisted cousin to the east. It passes Union Square; and here the hoofs of the dray horses seem to thunder in unison, recalling the tread of marching hosts—Hooray! But now come the silent and terrible mountains-buildings square as forts, high as the clouds, shutting out the sky, where thousands of slaves bend over desks all day. On the ground floors are only little fruit shops and laundries and book shops, where you see copies of “Littell’s Living Age” and G. W. M. Reynold’s novels in the windows. And next—poor Fourth Avenue!—the street glides into a mediaeval solitude. On each side are shops devoted to “Antiques.”

Let us say it is night. Men in rusty armor stand in the windows and menace the hurrying cars with raised, rusty iron gauntlets. Hauberks and helms, blunderbusses, Cromwellian breastplates, matchlocks, creeses, and the swords and daggers of an army of dead-and-gone gallants gleam dully in the ghostly light. Here and there from a corner saloon (lit with Jack-o’-lanterns or phosphorus), stagger forth shuddering, home-bound citizens, nerved by the tankards within to their fearsome journey adown that eldrich avenue lined with the bloodstained weapons of the fighting dead. What street could live inclosed by these mortuary relics, and trod by these spectral citizens in whose sunken hearts scarce one good whoop or tra-la-la remained?

Not Fourth Avenue. Not after the tinsel but enlivening glories of the Little Rialto—not after the echoing drum-beats of Union Square. There need be no tears, ladies and gentlemen; ‘tis but the suicide of a street. With a shriek and a crash Fourth Avenue dives headlong into the tunnel at Thirty-fourth and is never seen again.

Near the sad scene of the thoroughfare’s dissolution stood the modest restaurant of Quigg. It stands there yet if you care to view its crumbling red-brick front, its show window heaped with oranges, tomatoes, layer cakes, pies, canned asparagus—its papier-mâché lobster and two Maltese kittens asleep on a bunch of lettuce—if you care to sit at one of the little tables upon whose cloth has been traced in the yellowest of coffee stains the trail of the Japanese advance—to sit there with one eye on your umbrella and the other upon the bogus bottle from which you drop the counterfeit sauce foisted upon us by the cursed charlatan who assumes to be our dear old lord and friend, the “Nobleman in India.”

Quigg’s title came through his mother. One of her ancestors was a Margravine of Saxony. His father was a Tammany brave. On account of the dilution of his heredity he found that he could neither become a reigning potentate nor get a job in the City Hall. So he opened a restaurant. He was a man full of thought and reading. The business gave him a living, though he gave it little attention. One side of his house bequeathed to him a poetic and romantic adventure. The other gave him the restless spirit that made him seek adventure. By day he was Quigg, the restaurateur. By night he was the Margrave—the Caliph—the Prince of Bohemia—going about the city in search of the odd, the mysterious, the inexplicable, the recondite.

One night at 9, at which hour the restaurant closed, Quigg set forth upon his quest. There was a mingling of the foreign, the military and the artistic in his appearance as he buttoned his coat high up under his short-trimmed brown and gray beard and turned westward toward the more central life conduits of the city. In his pocket he had stored an assortment of cards, written upon, without which he never stirred out of doors. Each of those cards was good at his own restaurant for its face value. Some called simply for a bowl of soup or sandwiches and coffee; others entitled their bearer to one, two, three or more days of full meals; a few were for single regular meals; a very few were, in effect, meal tickets good for a week.

Of riches and power Margrave Quigg had none; but he had a Caliph’s heart—it may be forgiven him if his head fell short of the measure of Harun Al Rashid’s. Perhaps some of the gold pieces in Bagdad had put less warmth and hope into the complainants among the bazaars than had Quigg’s beef stew among the fishermen and one-eyed calenders of Manhattan.

Continuing his progress in search of romance to divert him, or of distress that he might aid, Quigg became aware of a fast-gathering crowd that whooped and fought and eddied at a corner of Broadway and the crosstown street that he was traversing. Hurrying to the spot he beheld a young man of an exceedingly melancholy and preoccupied demeanor engaged in the pastime of casting silver money from his pockets in the middle of the street. With each motion of the generous one’s hand the crowd huddled upon the falling largesse with yells of joy. Traffic was suspended. A policeman in the centre of the mob stooped often to the ground as he urged the blockaders to move on.

The Margrave saw at a glance that here was food for his hunger after knowledge concerning abnormal working of the human heart. He made his way swiftly to the young man’s side and took his arm. “Come with me at once,” he said, in the low but commanding voice that his waiters had learned to fear.

“Pinched,” remarked the young man, looking up at him with expressionless eyes. “Pinched by a painless dentist. Take me away, flatty, and give me gas. Some lay eggs and some lay none. When is a hen?”

Still deeply seized by some inward grief, but tractable, he allowed Quigg to lead him away and down the street to a little park.

There, seated on a bench, he upon whom a corner of the great Caliph’s mantle has descended, spake with kindness and discretion, seeking to know what evil had come upon the other, disturbing his soul and driving him to such ill-considered and ruinous waste of his substance and stores.

“I was doing the Monte Cristo act as adapted by Pompton, N. J., wasn’t I?” asked the young man.

“You were throwing small coins into the street for the people to scramble after,” said the Margrave.

“That’s it. You buy all the beer you can hold, and then you throw chicken feed to—Oh, curse that word chicken, and hens, feathers, roosters, eggs, and everything connected with it!”

“Young sir,” said the Margrave kindly, but with dignity, “though I do not ask your confidence, I invite it. I know the world and I know humanity. Man is my study, though I do not eye him as the scientist eyes a beetle or as the philanthropist gazes at the objects of his bounty-through a veil of theory and ignorance. It is my pleasure and distraction to interest myself in the peculiar and complicated misfortunes that life in a great city visits upon my fellow-men. You may be familiar with the history of that glorious and immortal ruler, the Caliph Harun Al Rashid, whose wise and beneficent excursions among his people in the city of Bagdad secured him the privilege of relieving so much of their distress. In my humble way I walk in his footsteps. I seek for romance and adventure in city streets—not in ruined castles or in crumbling palaces. To me the greatest marvels of magic are those that take place in men’s hearts when acted upon by the furious and diverse forces of a crowded population. In your strange behavior this evening I fancy a story lurks. I read in your act something deeper than the wanton wastefulness of a spendthrift. I observe in your countenance the certain traces of consuming grief or despair. I repeat—I invite your confidence. I am not without some power to alleviate and advise. Will you not trust me?”

“Gee, how you talk!” exclaimed the young man, a gleam of admiration supplanting for a moment the dull sadness of his eyes. “You’ve got the Astor Library skinned to a synopsis of preceding chapters. I mind that old Turk you speak of. I read ‘The Arabian Nights’ when I was a kid. He was a kind of Bill Devery and Charlie Schwab rolled into one. But, say, you might wave enchanted dishrags and make copper bottles smoke up coon giants all night without ever touching me. My case won’t yield to that kind of treatment.”

“If I could hear your story,” said the Margrave, with his lofty, serious smile.

“I’ll spiel it in about nine words,” said the young man, with a deep sigh, “but I don’t think you can help me any. Unless you’re a peach at guessing it’s back to the Bosphorus for you on your magic linoleum.”

###### THE STORY OF THE YOUNG MAN

###### AND THE HARNESS MAKER’S RIDDLE

“I work in Hildebrant’s saddle and harness shop down in Grant Street. I’ve worked there five years. I get $18 a week. That’s enough to marry on, ain’t it? Well, I’m not going to get married. Old Hildebrant is one of these funny Dutchmen—you know the kind—always getting off bum jokes. He’s got about a million riddles and things that he faked from Rogers Brothers’ great-grandfather. Bill Watson works there, too. Me and Bill have to stand for them chestnuts day after day. Why do we do it? Well, jobs ain’t to be picked off every Anheuser bush—And then there’s Laura.

“What? The old man’s daughter. Comes in the shop every day. About nineteen, and the picture of the blonde that sits on the palisades of the Rhine and charms the clam-diggers into the surf. Hair the color of straw matting, and eyes as black and shiny as the best harness blacking—think of that!

“Me? well, it’s either me or Bill Watson. She treats us both equal. Bill is all to the psychopathic about her; and me?—well, you saw me plating the roadbed of the Great Maroon Way with silver to-night. That was on account of Laura. I was spiflicated, Your Highness, and I wot not of what I wouldst.

“How? Why, old Hildebrandt says to me and Bill this afternoon: ‘Boys, one riddle have I for you gehabt haben. A young man who cannot riddles antworten, he is not so good by business for ein family to provide—is not that—hein?’ And he hands us a riddle—a conundrum, some calls it—and he chuckles interiorly and gives both of us till to-morrow morning to work out the answer to it. And he says whichever of us guesses the repartee end of it goes to his house o’ Wednesday night to his daughter’s birthday party. And it means Laura for whichever of us goes, for she’s naturally aching for a husband, and it’s either me or Bill Watson, for old Hildebrant likes us both, and wants her to marry somebody that’ll carry on the business after he’s stitched his last pair of traces.

“The riddle? Why, it was this: ‘What kind of a hen lays the longest? Think of that! What kind of a hen lays the longest? Ain’t it like a Dutchman to risk a man’s happiness on a fool proposition like that? Now, what’s the use? What I don’t know about hens would fill several incubators. You say you’re giving imitations of the old Arab guy that gave away—libraries in Bagdad. Well, now, can you whistle up a fairy that’ll solve this hen query, or not?”

When the young man ceased the Margrave arose and paced to and fro by the park bench for several minutes. Finally he sat again, and said, in grave and impressive tones:

“I must confess, sir, that during the eight years that I have spent in search of adventure and in relieving distress I have never encountered a more interesting or a more perplexing case. I fear that I have overlooked hens in my researches and observations. As to their habits, their times and manner of laying, their many varieties and cross-breedings, their span of life, their—”

“Oh, don’t make an Ibsen drama of it!” interrupted the young man, flippantly. “Riddles—especially old Hildebrant’s riddles—don’t have to be worked out seriously. They are light themes such as Sim Ford and Harry Thurston Peck like to handle. But, somehow, I can’t strike just the answer. Bill Watson may, and he may not. To-morrow will tell. Well, Your Majesty, I’m glad anyhow that you butted in and whiled the time away. I guess Mr. Al Rashid himself would have bounced back if one of his constituents had conducted him up against this riddle. I’ll say good night. Peace fo’ yours, and what-you-may-call-its of Allah.”

The Margrave, still with a gloomy air, held out his hand.

“I cannot express my regret,” he said, sadly. “Never before have I found myself unable to assist in some way. ‘What kind of a hen lays the longest? It is a baffling problem. There is a hen, I believe, called the Plymouth Rock that—”

“Cut it out,” said the young man. “The Caliph trade is a mighty serious one. I don’t suppose you’d even see anything funny in a preacher’s defense of John D. Rockefeller. Well, good night, Your Nibs.”

From habit the Margrave began to fumble in his pockets. He drew forth a card and handed it to the young man.

“Do me the favor to accept this, anyhow,” he said. “The time may come when it might be of use to you.”

“Thanks!” said the young man, pocketing it carelessly. “My name is Simmons.”

###### \* \* \*

Shame to him who would hint that the reader’s interest shall altogether pursue the Margrave August Michael von Paulsen Quigg. I am indeed astray if my hand fail in keeping the way where my peruser’s heart would follow. Then let us, on the morrow, peep quickly in at the door of Hildebrant, harness maker.

Hildebrant’s 200 pounds reposed on a bench, silver-buckling a raw leather martingale.

Bill Watson came in first.

“Vell,” said Hildebrant, shaking all over with the vile conceit of the joke-maker, “haf you guessed him? ‘Vat kind of a hen lays der longest?’”

“Er—why, I think so,” said Bill, rubbing a servile chin. “I think so, Mr. Hildebrant—the one that lives the longest—Is that right?”

“Nein!” said Hildebrant, shaking his head violently. “You haf not guessed der answer.”

Bill passed on and donned a bed-tick apron and bachelorhood.

In came the young man of the Arabian Night’s fiasco—pale, melancholy, hopeless.

“Vell,” said Hildebrant, “haf you guessed him? ‘Vat kind of a hen lays der longest?’”

Simmons regarded him with dull savagery in his eye. Should he curse this mountain of pernicious humor—curse him and die? Why should—But there was Laura.

Dogged, speechless, he thrust his hands into his coat pockets and stood. His hand encountered the strange touch of the Margrave’s card. He drew it out and looked at it, as men about to be hanged look at a crawling fly. There was written on it in Quigg’s bold, round hand: “Good for one roast chicken to bearer.”

Simmons looked up with a flashing eye.

“A dead one!” said he.

“Goot!” roared Hildebrant, rocking the table with giant glee. “Dot is right! You gome at mine house at 8 o’clock to der party.”