

0

HISTORIC ODDITIES

AND

STRANGE EVENTS

BY

S. BARING-GOULD, M.A.

AUTHOR OF "MEHALAH," "JOHN HERRING," ETC.

FIRST SERIES

LONDON
METHUEN & CO.
18 BURY STREET, W.C.

1889

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
PREFACE,	vii
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF BATHURST,	1
THE DUCHESS OF KINGSTON,	26
GENERAL MALLET,	51
SCHWEINICHEN'S MEMOIRS,	67
THE LOCKSMITH GAMAIN,	83
ABRAM THE USURER,	103
SOPHIE APITZSCH,	121
PETER NIELSEN,	136
THE WONDER-WORKING PRINCE HOHENLOHE, ...	164
THE SNAIL TELEGRAPH,	185
THE COUNTESS GOERLITZ,	199
A WAX AND HONEY-MOON,	234
THE ELECTRESS' PLOT,	257
SUESS OPPENHEIM,	271
IGNATIUS FESSLER,	294

Abram the Usurer.*

IN the reign of Heraclius, when Sergius was patriarch of Constantinople, there lived in Byzantium a merchant named Theodore, a good man and just, fearing God, and serving him with all his heart. He went a voyage to the ports of Syria and Palestine with his wares, in a large well-laden vessel, sold his goods to profit, and turned his ship's head homewards with a good lading of silks and spices, the former some of the produce of the looms of distant China, brought in caravans through Persia and Syria to the emporiums on the Mediterranean.

It was late in the year when Theodore began his voyage home, the equinoctial gales had begun to blow, and prudence would have suggested that he should winter in Cyprus; but he was eager to return to Byzantium to his beloved wife, and to prepare for another adventure in the ensuing spring.

But he was overtaken by a storm as he was sailing up the Propontis, and to save the vessel he was obliged to throw all the lading overboard. He

* This account is taken from a sermon preached in the Church of St. Sophia at Constantinople on Orthodoxy Sunday, printed by Combesius (*Auctuarium novum*, pars post. col. 644), from a MS. in the National Library at Paris. Another copy of the sermon is in the Library at Turin. The probable date of the composition is the tenth century. Orthodoxy Sunday was not instituted till 842.

reached Constantinople in safety, but with the loss of his goods. His grief and despair were excessive. His wife was unable to console him. He declared that he was weary of the world, his loss was sent him as a warning from heaven not to set his heart on Mammon, and that he was resolved to enter a monastery, and spend the rest of his days in devotion.

"Hasten, husband mine," said the wife, "put this scheme into execution at once; for if you delay you may change your mind."

The manifest impatience of his wife to get rid of him somewhat cooled the ardour of Theodore for the monastic profession, and before taking the irrevocable step, he consulted a friend. "I think, dearest brother, nay, I am certain, that this misfortune came on me as the indication of the finger of Providence that I should give up merchandise and care only for the saving of my soul."

"My friend," answered the other, "I do not see this in the same light as you. Every merchant must expect loss. It is one of the ordinary risks of sailors. It is absurd to despair. Go to your friends and borrow of them sufficient to load your vessel again, and try your luck once more. You are known as a merchant, and trusted as an honest man, and will have no difficulty in raising the sum requisite."

Theodore rushed home, and announced to his wife that he had already changed his mind, and that he was going to borrow money.

"Whatever pleases you is right in my eyes," said the lady.

Theodore then went the round of his acquaintances,

told them of his misfortune, and then asked them to lend him enough to restock his vessel, promising to pay them a good percentage on the money lent. But the autumn had been fatal to more vessels than that of Theodore, and he found that no one was disposed to advance him the large sum he required. He went from door to door, but a cold refusal met him everywhere. Disappointed, and sick at heart, distressed at finding friends so unfriendly, he returned home, and said to his wife, "Woman! the world is hard and heartless, I will have nothing more to do with it. I will become a monk."

"Dearest husband, do so by all means, and I shall be well pleased," answered the wife.

Theodore tossed on his bed all night, unable to sleep; before dawn an idea struck him. There was a Jew named Abram who had often importuned him to trade with his money, but whom he had invariably refused. He would try this man as a last resource.

So when morning came, Theodore rose and went to the shop of Abram. The Hebrew listened attentively to his story, and then said, smiling, "Master Theodore, when thou wast rich, I often asked thee to take my money and trade with it in foreign parts, so that I might turn it over with advantage. But I always met with refusal. And now that thou art poor, with only an empty ship, thou comest to me to ask for a loan. What if again tempest should fall on thee, and wreck and ruin be thy lot, where should I look for my money? Thou art poor. If I were to sell thy house it would not fetch much. Nay, if I am to lend thee money thou must provide a surety, to whom I

may apply, and who will repay me, should accident befall thee. Go, find security, and I will find the money."

So Theodore went to his best friend, and told him the circumstances, and asked him to stand surety for him to the Jew.

"Dear friend," answered he, "I should be most happy to oblige you; but I am a poor man, I have not as much money in the world as would suffice. The Hebrew would not accept me as surety, he knows the state of my affairs too well. But I will do for you what little I can. We will go together to some merchants, and together beseech them to stand security for you to the Jew."

So the two friends went to a rich merchant with whom they were acquainted, and told him what they wanted; but he blustered and turned red, and said, "Away with you, fellows; who ever heard of such insolence as that two needy beggars should ask a man of substance like me to go with them to the den of a cursed infidel Jew. God be thanked! I have no dealings with Jews. I never have spoken to one in my life, and never give them a greeting when I pass any in street or market-place. A man who goes to the Jews to-day, goes to the dogs to-morrow, and to the devil the day after."

The friends visited other merchants, but with like ill-success. Theodore had spent the day fasting, and he went supperless to bed, very hopeless, and with the prospect growing more distinct of being obliged to put on the cowl of the monk, a prospect which somehow or other he did not relish.

Next morning he started from home to tell Abram his failure. His way was through the great square called the Copper-Market before the Imperial palace. Now there stood there a porch consisting of four pillars, which supported a dome covered with brazen tiles, the whole surmounted by a cross, on the east side of which, looking down on the square, and across over the sparkling Bosphorus to the hills of Asia, was a large, solemn figure of the Crucified. This porch and cross had been set up by Constantine the Great,¹ and had been restored by Anastasius.

As Theodore sped through the Copper-Market in the morning, he looked up; the sky was of the deepest gentian blue. Against it, glittering like gold in the early sun, above the blazing, brazen tiles, stood the great cross with the holy form thereon. Theodore halted, in his desolation, doubt and despair, and looked up at the figure. It was in the old, grave Byzantine style, very solemn, without the pain expressed in Mediæval crucifixes, and like so many early figures of the sort was probably vested and crowned.

A sudden inspiration took hold of the ruined man. He fell on his knees, stretched his hands towards the

¹ This famous figure was cast down and broken by Leo the Isaurian in 730, a riot ensued, the market-women interfering with the soldiers, who were engaged on pulling down the figure, they shook the ladders and threw down one who was engaged in hacking the face of the figure. This led to the execution of ten persons, among them Gregory, head of the bodyguard, and Mary, a lady of the Imperial family. The Empress Irene set up a mosaic figure in its place. This was again destroyed by Leo the Armenian, and again restored after his death by Theophilus in 829.

shining form, and cried, "Lord Jesus Christ! the hope of the whole earth, the only succour of all who are cast down, the sure confidence of those that look to Thee! All on whom I could lean have failed me. I have none on earth on whom I can call. Do Thou, Lord, be surety for me, though I am unworthy to ask it." Then filled with confidence he rose from his knees, and ran to the house of Abram, and bursting in on him said, "Be of good cheer, I have found a Surety very great and noble and mighty. Trust thy money, He will keep it safe."

Abram answered, "Let the man come, and sign the deed and see the money paid over."

"Nay, my brother," said Theodore; "come thou with me. I have hurried in thus to bring thee to him."

Then Abram went with Theodore, who led him to the Copper-Market, and bade him be seated, and then raising his finger, he pointed to the sacred form hanging on the cross, and, full of confidence, said to the Hebrew, "There, friend, thou could'st not have a better security than the Lord of heaven and earth. I have besought Him to stand for me, and I know He is so good that He will not deny me."

The Jew was perplexed. He said nothing for a moment or two, and then, wondering at the man's faith, answered, "Friend, dost thou not know the difference between the faith of a Christian and of a Hebrew? How can'st thou ask me to accept as thy surety, One whom thou believest my people to have rejected and crucified? However, I will trust thee, for thou art a God-fearing and an honest man, and I will risk my money."

So they twain returned to the Jew's quarters, and Abram counted out fifty pounds of gold, in our money about £2,400. He tied the money up in bags, and bade his servants bear it after Theodore. And Abram and the glad merchant came to the Copper-Market, and then the Jew ordered that the money bags should be set down under the Tetrastyle where was the great crucifix. Then said the Hebrew usurer, "See, Theodore, I make over to thee the loan here before thy God." And there, in the face of the great image of his Saviour, Theodore received the loan, and swore to deal faithfully by the Jew, and to restore the money to him with usury.

After this, the merchant bought a cargo for his vessel, and hired sailors, and set sail for Syria. He put into port at Tyre and Sidon, and traded with his goods, and bought in place of them many rich Oriental stuffs, with spices and gums, and when his ship was well laden, he sailed for Constantinople.

But again misfortune befell him. A storm arose, and the sailors were constrained to throw the bales of silk, and bags of costly gums, and vessels of Oriental chasing into the greedy waves. But as the ship began to fill, they were obliged to get into the boat and escape to land. The ship keeled over and drifted into shallow water. When the storm abated they got to her, succeeded in floating her, and made the best of their way in the battered ship to Constantinople, thankful that they had preserved their lives. But Theodore was in sad distress, chiefly because he had lost Abram's money. "How shall I dare to face the man who dealt so generously by me?" he said to

himself. "What shall I say, when he reproaches me? What answer can I make to my Surety for having lost the money entrusted to me?"

Now when Abram heard that Theodore had arrived in Constantinople in his wrecked vessel with the loss of all his cargo, he went to him at once, and found the man prostrate in his chamber, the pavement wet with his tears of shame and disappointment. Abram laid his hand gently on his shoulder, and said, in a kind voice, "Rise, my brother, do not be downcast; give glory to God who rules all things as He wills, and follow me home. God will order all for the best."

Then the merchant rose, and followed the Jew, but he would not lift his eyes from the ground, for he was ashamed to look him in the face. Abram was troubled at the distress of his friend, and he said to him, as he shut the door of his house, "Let not thy heart be broken with overmuch grief, dearest friend, for it is the mark of a wise man to bear all things with firm mind. See! I am ready again to lend thee fifty pounds of gold, and may better fortune attend thee this time. I trust that our God will bless the money and multiply it, so that in the end we shall lose nothing by our former misadventure."

"Then," said Theodore, "Christ shall again stand security for me. Bring the money to the Tetrastyle."

Therefore again the bags of gold were brought before the cross, and when they had then been made over to the merchant, Abram said, "Accept, Master Theodore, this sum of fifty pounds of gold, paid over to thee before thy Surety, and go in peace. And may the

Lord God prosper thee on thy journey, and make plain the way before thee. And remember, that before this thy Surety thou art bound to me for a hundred pounds of gold."

Having thus spoken, Abram returned home. Theodore repaired and reloaded his ship, engaged mariners and made ready to sail. But on the day that he was about to depart, he went into the Copper-Market, and kneeling down, with his face towards the cross, he prayed the Lord to be his companion and captain, and to guide him on his journey, and bring him safe through all perils with his goods back to Byzantium once more.

Then he went on to the house of Abram to bid him farewell. And the Jew said to him, "Keep thyself safe, brother, and beware now of trusting thy ship to the sea at the time of equinoctial gales. Thou hast twice experienced the risk, run not into it again. Winter at the place whither thou goest, and that I may know how thou farest, if thou hast the opportunity, send me some of the money by a sure hand. Then there is less chance of total ruin, for if one portion fails, the other is likely to be secure."

Theodore approved of this advice, and promised to follow it; so then the Jew and the Christian parted with much affection and mutual respect, for each knew the other to be a good and true man, fearing God, and seeking to do that which is right. This time Theodore turned his ship's head towards the West, intending to carry his wares to the markets of Spain. He passed safely through the Straits of Hercules, and sailed North. Then a succession of

steady strong breezes blew from the South and swept him on so that he could not get into harbour till he reached Britain. He anchored in a bay on the rugged Cornish coast, in the very emporium of tin and lead, in the *Cassiterides* famed of old for supplying ore precious in the manufacture of bronze. He readily disposed of all his merchandise, and bought as much tin and lead as his ship would hold. His goods had sold so well, and tin and lead were so cheap that he found he had fifty pounds in gold in addition to the cargo.

The voyage back from Britain to Byzantium was long and dangerous, and Theodore was uneasy. He found no other ships from Constantinople where he was, and no means presented themselves for sending back the money in part, as he had promised. He was a conscientious man, and he wished to keep his word.

He set sail from Cornwall before the summer was over, passed safely through the straits into the Mediterranean, but saw no chance of reaching Constantinople before winter. He would not again risk his vessel in the gales of the equinox, and he resolved to winter in Sicily. He arrived too late in the year to be able to send a message and the money to Abram. His promise troubled him, and he cast about in his mind how to keep his word.

At last, in the simple faith which coloured the whole life of the man, he made a very solid wooden box and tarred it well internally and externally. Then he inclosed in it the fifty pounds of gold he had made by his goods in Britain over and above his

lading of lead and tin, and with the money he put a letter, couched in these terms :

“In the name of my heir and God, my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is also my Surety for a large sum of money, I, Theodore, humbly address my master Abram, who, with God, is my benefactor and creditor.

“I would have thee know, Master Abram, that we all, by the mercy of God, are in good health. God has verily prospered us well and brought our merchandise to a good market. And now, see! I send thee fifty pounds of gold, which I commit to the care of my Surety, and He will convey the money safely to thy hands. Receive it from me and do not forget us. Farewell.”

Then he fastened up the box, and raised his eyes to heaven, and prayed to God, saying: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Mediator between God and Man, Who dwellest in Heaven, but hast respect unto the lowly; hear the voice of thy servant this day; because Thou hast proved Thyself to me a good and kind Surety, I trust to Thee to return to my benefactor and creditor, Abram, the money I promised to send him. Trusting in Thee, Lord, I commit this little box to the sea!”

So saying he flung the case containing the gold and the letter into the waves; and standing on a cliff watched it floating on the waters, rising and falling on the glittering wavelets, gradually drifting further and further out to sea, till it was lost to his sight, and then, nothing doubting but that the Lord Christ would look after the little box and guide it over the waste of waters to its proper destination, he went

H

back to his lodging, and told the ship pilot what he had done. The sailor remained silent wondering in his mind at the great faith of his master. Then his rough heart softened, and he knelt down and blessed and praised God.

That night Theodore had a dream, and in the morning he told it to the pilot.

"I thought," said he, "that I was back in Byzantium, and standing in the Copper-Market before the great cross with Christ on it. And I fancied in my dream that Abram was at my side. And I looked, and saw him hold up his hands, and receive the box in them, and the great figure of Christ said, 'See, Abram, I give thee what Theodore committed to my trust.' And, thereupon, I awoke trembling. So now I am quite satisfied that the gold is in safe keeping, and will infallibly reach its destination."

The summer passed, the storms of autumn had swept over the grey sea, and torn away from the trees the last russet leaves; winter had set in; yet Abram had received no news of Theodore.

He did not doubt the good faith of his friend, but he began to fear that ill-luck attended him. He had risked a large sum, and would feel the loss severely should this cargo be lost like the former one. He talked the matter over with his steward, and considered it from every imaginable point of view. His anxiety took him constantly to the shore to watch the ships that arrived, hoping to hear news by some of them, and to recover part of his money. He hardly expected the return of Theodore after the injunctions he had given him not to risk his vessel in a stormy season.

One day he was walking with his steward by the sea-side, when the waves were more boisterous than usual. Not a ship was visible. All were in winter quarters. Abram drew off his sandals, and began to wash his feet in the sea water. Whilst so doing he observed something floating at a little distance. With the assistance of his steward he fished out a box black with tar, firmly fastened up, like a solid cube of wood. Moved by curiosity he carried the box home, and succeeded with a little difficulty in forcing it open. Inside he found a letter, not directed, but marked with three crosses, and a bag of gold. It need hardly be said that this was the box Theodore had entrusted to Christ, and his Surety had fulfilled His trust and conveyed it to the hands of the creditor.

Next spring Theodore returned to Constantinople in safety. As soon as he had disembarked, he hastened to the house of Abram to tell him the results of his voyage.

The Jewish usurer, wishing to prove him, feigned not to understand, when Theodore related how he had sent him fifty pounds of gold, and made as though he had not received the money. But the merchant was full of confidence, and he said, "I cannot understand this, brother, for I enclosed the money in a box along with a letter, and committed it to the custody of my Saviour Christ, Who has acted as Surety for me unworthy. But as thou sayest that thou hast not received it, come with me, and let us go together before the crucifix, and say before it that thou hast not had the money conveyed to thee, and then I will believe thy word."

Abram promised to accompany his friend, and rising from their seats, they went together to the Copper-Market. And when they came to the Tetra-style, Theodore raised his hands to the Crucified, and said, "My Saviour and Surety, didst Thou not restore the gold to Abram that I entrusted to Thee for that purpose?"

There was something so wonderful, so beautiful, in the man's faith, that Abram was overpowered; and withal there was the evidence that it was not misplaced so clear to the Jew, that the light of conviction like a dazzling sunbeam darted into his soul, and Theodore saw the Hebrew usurer fall prostrate on the pavement, half fainting with the emotion which oppressed him.

Theodore ran and fetched water in his hands and sprinkled his face, and brought the usurer round. And Abram said, "As God liveth, my friend, I will not enter into my house till I have taken thy Lord and Surety for my Master." A crowd began to gather, and it was bruited abroad that the Jewish usurer sought baptism. And when the story reached the ears of the Emperor Heraclius, he glorified God. So Abram was put under instruction, and was baptised by the patriarch Sergius.¹

And after seven days a solemn procession was instituted through the streets of Constantinople to the Copper-Market, in which walked the emperor and the patriarch, and all the clergy of the city; and the box which had contained the money was conveyed

¹ Sergius was patriarch of Constantinople between 610 and 638. He embraced the Monothelite heresy.

by them to the Tetrastyle and laid up, along with the gold and the letter before the image, to be a memorial of what had taken place to all generations. And thenceforth the crucifix received the common appellation of Antiphonetos, or the Surety.

As for the tin and lead with which the vessel of Theodore was freighted, it sold for a great price, so that both he and Abram realised a large sum by the transaction. But neither would keep to himself any portion of it, but gave it all to the Church of S. Sophia, and therewith a part of the sanctuary was overlaid with silver. Then Theodore and his wife, with mutual consent, gave up the world and retired into monastic institutions.

Abram afterwards built and endowed an oratory near the Tetrastyle, and Sergius ordained him priest and his two sons deacons.

Thus ends this strange and very beautiful story, which I have merely condensed from the somewhat prolix narrative of the Byzantine preacher. The reader will probably agree with me that if sermons in the 19th century were as entertaining as this of the 10th, fewer people would be found to go to sleep during their delivery.

I have told the tale as related by the preacher. But there are reasons which awaken suspicion that he somewhat erred as to his dates ; but that, nevertheless the story is really not without a foundation of fact. Towards the close of the oration the preacher points to the ambone, and the thusiasterion, and bids his hearers remark how they are overlaid with silver, and this he says was the silver that Abram, the wealthy Jewish

usurer, and Theodore, the merchant, gave to the Church of S. Sophia.

Now it happens that we have got a contemporary record of this overlaying of the sanctuary with silver ; we know from the pen of Procopius of Gaza that it took place in the reign of Justinian in A.D. 537.¹

This was preparatory to the dedication of the great Church, when the Emperor and the wealthy citizens of Byzantium were lavishly contributing to the adornment of the glorious building.

We can quite understand how that the new convert and the grateful merchant were carried away by the current of the general enthusiasm, and gave all their silver to the plating of the sanctuary of the new Church. Procopius tells us that forty thousand pounds of silver were spent in this work. Not all of this, however, could have been given by Abram and Theodore.

If this then were the date of the conversion of Abram, for Heraclius we must read Justinian, and for Sergius we must substitute Mennas. As the sermon was not preached till four hundred years after, the error can be accounted for, one imperial benefactor of the Church was mistaken for another.

Now about the time of Justinian, we know from other sources that there was a converted Jew named Abram who founded and built a church and monastery in Constantinople, and which in after times was known as the Abramite Monastery. We are told this by John Moschus. We can not fix the exact date of the foundation, Moschus heard about

¹ Fabricius, *Bibl. Græca*, Ed. Harles, T.X. p. 124, 125.

A.D. 600 from the abbot John Rutilus, who had heard it from Stephen the Moabite, that the Monastery of the Abramites had been constructed by Abram who afterwards was raised to the metropolitan See of Ephesus. We may put then the foundation of the monastery at about A.D. 540.

Now Abram of Ephesus succeeded Procopius who was bishop in 560; and his successor was Rufinus in 597. The date of the elevation of Abram to the metropolitan throne of Ephesus is not known exactly, but it was probably about 565.

There is, of course, much conjecture in thus identifying the usurer Abram with Abram, Bishop of Ephesus; but there is certainly a probability that they were identical; and if so, then one more pretty story of the good man survives. After having built the monastery in Constantinople, Moschus tells us that Abram went to Jerusalem, the home to which a Jewish heart naturally turns, and there he set to work to erect another monastery. Now there was among the workmen engaged on the building a mason who ate but sparingly, conversed with none, but worked diligently, and prayed much in his hours of relaxation from labour.

Abram became interested in the man, and called him to him, and learned from him his story. It was this. The mason had been a monk in the Theodorian Monastery along with his brother. The brother weary of the life, had left and fallen into grave moral disorders. Then this one now acting as mason had gone after him, laid aside his cowl and undertaken the same daily toil as the erring brother, that he

might be with him, waiting his time when by means of advice or example he might draw the young man from his life of sin. But though he had laid aside the outward emblems of his monastic profession, he kept the rule of life as closely as he was able, cultivating prayer and silence and fasting. Then Abram deeply moved, said to the monk-mason: "God will look on thy fraternal charity; be of good courage, He will give thee thy brother at thy petition."