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Croesus and Fate

Leo Tolstoy

1910

In olden times — long, long before the coming of Christ — there reigned over a certain country a great king called Croesus. He had much gold and silver, and many precious stones, as well as numberless soldiers and slaves. Indeed, he thought that in all the world there could be no happier man than himself.

But one day there chanced to visit the country which Croesus ruled a Greek philosopher named Solon. Far and wide was Solon famed as a wise man and a just; and, inasmuch as his fame had reached Croesus also, the king commanded that he should be conducted to his presence.

Seated upon his throne, and robed in his most gorgeous apparel, Croesus asked of Solon: “Have you ever seen aught more splendid than this?”

“Of a surety have I,” replied Solon. “Peacocks, cocks, and pheasants glitter with colors so diverse and so brilliant that no art can compare with them.”

Croesus was silent as he thought to himself: “Since this is not enough, I must show him something more, to surprise him.”

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So he exhibited the whole of his riches before Solon's eyes, as well as boasted of the number of foes he had slain, and the number of territories he had conquered. Then he said to the philosopher:

"You have lived long in the world, and have visited many countries. Tell me whom you consider to be the happiest man living?"

"The happiest man living I consider to be a certain poor man who lives in Athens," replied Solon.

The king was surprised at this answer, for he had made certain that Solon would name him himself; yet, for all that, the philosopher had named a perfectly obscure individual!

"Why do you say that?" asked Croesus.

"Because," replied Solon, "the man of whom I speak has worked hard all his life, has been content with little, has reared fine children, has served his city honorably, and has achieved a noble reputation."

When Croesus heard this he exclaimed:

"And do you reckon my happiness as nothing, and consider that I am not fit to be compared with the man of whom you speak?"

To which Solon replied:

"Often it befalls that a poor man is happier than a rich man. Call no man happy until he is dead."

The king dismissed Solon, for he was not pleased at his words, and had no belief in him.

"A fig for melancholy!" he thought. "While a man lives he should live for pleasure."

So he forgot about Solon entirely.

Not long afterwards the king's son went hunting, but wounded himself by a mischance, and died of the wound. Next, it was told to Croesus that the powerful Emperor Cyrus was coming to make war upon him.

So Croesus went out against Cyrus with a great army, but the enemy proved the stronger, and, having won the battle and shattered Croesus' forces, penetrated to the capital.

Then the foreign soldiers began to pillage all King Croesus' riches, and to slay the inhabitants, and to sack and fire the city. One soldier seized Croesus himself, and was just about to stab him, when the king's son darted forward to defend his father, and cried aloud:

"Do not touch him! That is Croesus, the king!"

So the soldiers bound Croesus, and carried him away to the Emperor; but Cyrus was celebrating his victory at a banquet, and could not speak with the captive, so orders were sent out for Croesus to be executed.

In the middle of the city square the soldiers built a great burning-pile, and upon the top of it they placed King Croesus, bound him to a stake, and set fire to the pile.

Croesus gazed around him, upon his city and upon his palace. Then he remembered the words of the Greek philosopher, and, bursting into tears, could only say:

"Ah, Solon, Solon!"

The soldiers were closing in about the pile when the Emperor Cyrus arrived in person to view the execution. As he did so he caught these words uttered by Croesus, but could not understand them.

So he commanded Croesus to be taken from the pile, and inquired of him what he had just said. Croesus answered :

"I was but naming the name of a wise man — of one who told me a great truth — a truth that is of greater worth than all earthly riches, than all our kingly glory."

And Croesus related to Croesus his conversation with Solon. The story touched the heart of the Emperor, for he bethought him that he too was but a man, that he too knew not what Fate might have in store for him. So in the end he had mercy upon Croesus, and became his friend.