

King Solomon Becomes a Beggar

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



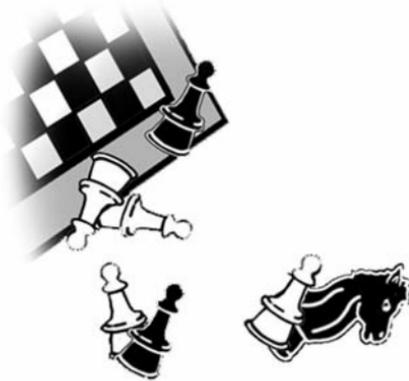
Translated and Annotated by
Professor Solomon

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Illustrated by Steve Solomon



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King Solomon Becomes a Beggar

KING SOLOMON AND ASMODEUS WERE PLAYING CHESS. They were seated at a small table on the roof of the palace. Dusk had arrived; and a bluish haze was settling over the palace and the city below.

When the game was over, Solomon leaned back and looked at Jerusalem.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve always been struck by the quality of light at this hour. Twilight transforms the city—lends it a dreamlike air. The huddled houses and surrounding walls seem unreal. And if Jerusalem is a dream, what about its inhabitants? Are we illusory, too? Some sort of phantasms? Imaginary characters, perhaps, in a work of fiction?”

“My dear Solomon,” said Asmodeus with a laugh, “I can assure you we are real. As a master of illusion, I can tell the difference. Now it’s true that some illusions may be mistaken for reality—so realistic are they. I could conjure up for you such an illusion. We jinn are skilled at deception; and as king of the jinn, my own powers are unsurpassed.”

“What would that illusion be like?”

“I can do different types,” said the jinni. My favorite involves an imposture—a simulation of some actual person. Would you like a demonstration?”

“I’m not sure. Might it not be unnerving? Or even disturbing?”

“Illusions are harmless, if recognized for what they are. Let me create one for you right now. A convincing illusion, to demonstrate my powers of deception. You’ll be impressed.”

“How long will it last?”

“A minute or two. No longer, I promise.”

“Proceed then.”

“With pleasure. But first you must remove your ring.”

“Why?”

“It contains the Ineffable Name—the one thing that thwarts my powers. For the illusion to work, you cannot be wearing the ring.”

Solomon hesitated for a moment. Then he said: “I shall take it off. But only for a minute or two. That’s how long this illusion will last, correct?”

“You have my word.”

Solomon removed his ring and put it on the table.

Asmodeus swiveled around and shook himself. Then he turned back to Solomon and smiled. He had changed. His face was no longer his own. Instead, it was that of King Solomon.

“Behold my illusion,” said Asmodeus, in a voice that was also Solomon’s. “I have taken on your appearance. A convincing imposture, is it not? Unaware of my true identity, would you not be fooled?”

“I certainly would,” said Solomon, staring at him in amazement. “Except for your turban, you resemble me exactly. It’s like looking into a mirror.”

“Such is the power of illusion. A dangerous power, in the wrong hands.”

“Indeed.”

Now a thought seemed to occur to Asmodeus; and he tapped on the chessboard. “How diverting it would be to take your place,” he said. “To pass myself off as King Solomon. To rule over Israel! If I could be you for a while, what an excellent sport. Tell me, how many wives have you now?”

“Nearly six hundred. And they’re still arriving.”

“I would enjoy having such a harem. My friend, why not take a vacation and let me substitute for you?”

“Alas, no vacations for me. My duties keep me bound to the palace.”

“Exactly why you need time off, to escape the rigors of your job. Listen, you need a vacation—and are going to take one. *Let me have that crown.*”

Reaching across the chessboard, Asmodeus plucked the crown from Solomon’s head.

“What are you doing?” cried Solomon. “Give me that back.”

But Asmodeus was removing his turban. And tossing it aside, he donned the crown. “Behold King Solomon of Israel!” he said.

“I think it’s time to end this illusion.”

“Why? I like my new identity. I’m going to keep it for a while.”

“And your promise—that the illusion would last only a minute or two?”

“I’ve changed my mind. That’s my prerogative. After all, I’m King Solomon.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Solomon. He reached for his ring. But Asmodeus snatched it away.

“Let’s start by getting rid of this,” said the jinni. “Lo, my first act as king.” He stood up and hurled the ring westward.

“What have you done with my ring?” cried Solomon.

“I have tossed it far away—into the sea. And now I shall toss *you*. Goodbye, superfluous one. Enjoy your vacation.”

Asmodeus lifted him out of his seat and hurled Solomon in the opposite direction.

Like a human cannonball, King Solomon flew through the air. He traveled hundreds of miles, landed in a haystack, and lost consciousness.



It was daylight when he opened his eyes and found himself in the haystack.

Dazed and disoriented, Solomon climbed out and looked about. He was standing in a field. Not far from him cows were grazing. On the horizon was a range of mountains.

“Where am I? To what distant land has Asmodeus flung me? And has he indeed taken my place? O that treacherous fellow!”

As the cows watched, Solomon staggered to a nearby road. Stupefied by what had befallen him, he began to follow the road.

And he became a wanderer. By day he trudged along dusty roads. By night he slept in barns or carts or haystacks. For food he begged from door to door. His clothes

were soon tattered. His face became haggard; his beard, unkempt.

Initially, he identified himself to people he met as “King Solomon of Israel.” But deeming him a madman, they responded with derisive laughter or looks of pity. Children trailed after him, taunting him and throwing stones. “It’s King Solomon!” they called out. “Hail to His Majesty!” So he soon learned to conceal his identity.

Occasionally he thought about returning home. But Jerusalem was far away. And even if he managed to get back, who would believe his story? Who would believe that this bedraggled beggar was King Solomon, and that an impostor occupied the throne?

Moreover, Solomon was convinced that he merited this fate—as punishment for his sins.

So he continued to wander and to beg.



Mashkemam was a city in Arabia. Within its walls were a palace, a temple dedicated to Chemosh, and a warren of mud-brick houses. And adjoining the palace was a marketplace.

It was mid-afternoon; and the marketplace was bustling. Merchants hawked their wares. A juggler tossed balls. A fortuneteller dispensed advice. And a clamorous crowd—the men in tasseled caps, the women in veils—circulated among the stalls.

Seated on the ground by a vegetable stand was King Solomon. He had a bowl in front of him and was soliciting alms.

A servant from the palace had stopped to buy vegetables. Taking pity on the beggar, the servant offered him a job—as scullion in the royal kitchen. Solomon shrugged and accepted. Asked his name, he replied: “Shlomo.” And he followed the servant to the palace.

There he was put to work. He washed dishes, scoured pots, chopped vegetables, stirred the contents of cauldrons. These labors rekindled old habits of diligence; and Shlomo distinguished himself as a scullion. It was not long before

he was promoted to assistant cook.

Now the king of Mashkemam had a daughter. Her name was Naamah; and she was beautiful, kindhearted, and intelligent. Whenever a feast was held in the palace, Naamah would help organize it. Thus, she came into contact with Shlomo. And she was struck by his refined speech and erudition—and by his noble character, which shone through the humble exterior. Naamah appreciated Shlomo's keen observations, and enjoyed conversing with him. And the two of them fell in love.

So Naamah arranged an audience with her father. Accompanied by Shlomo, she approached the king and announced their desire to marry. The king was outraged.

"You must be kidding," he said to his daughter. "This man's a cook in my kitchen—a lowly laborer! He's not suitable for you. I want you to marry a king. Some wealthy monarch, like Tiglath of Assyria or Solomon of Israel."

"I *am* Solomon," blurted out Shlomo.

The king glared at him. "Lowly—and loony too."

But Naamah was defiant. She was going to marry Shlomo, she insisted—with or without her father's blessing. Whereupon, the king grew furious and disowned her. Such disobedience merited execution, he declared. But instead, the king ordered that the lovers be taken into the desert and abandoned there.

"They would defy the wishes of a king?" he said. "Let them deal with the rigors of a desert. They may find it less merciful than I!"



Shlomo and Naamah watched as the soldiers disappeared over the horizon. The two had been left in the midst of the desert, with a meager supply of food and water. The sun was setting.

"The soldiers have abandoned us here," said Naamah. "We are doomed."

"Let us pray to GOD Most High," said Shlomo. "Surely He will come to our aid."

"No, let us pray to Chemosh."

They debated the matter. Finally they decided to pray to

their respective deities. So as night fell, Shlomo and Naamah were murmuring prayers.

Daybreak found them asleep in one another's arms, oblivious to the desert that surrounded them.

They were awoken by the braying of camels. To their astonishment, a caravan was passing by. They jumped to their feet and ran towards it, waving and shouting.

And they were soon bouncing along on a camel—and debating whose prayers had been answered. They decided finally that GOD Most High and Chemosh had cooperated in their rescue.



Mirfa was a seaport on the east coast of Arabia. Its harbor was filled with fishing boats and cargo ships. Overlooking the harbor was an esplanade, lined with palm trees and furnished with benches.

On a bench sat Shlomo and Naamah. They were eating sherbet, admiring the view, and discussing their future.

“In the morning the caravan moves on,” said Naamah. “And you and I? Shall we continue on with it?”

“We could stay here,” said Shlomo. “I like this town. It’s peaceful and picturesque.”

“My sentiments as well,” said Naamah. “But what would we do? How would we survive?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve had a job offer.”

“Really?”

“I was chatting with an official from the custom house. It seems there’s a position open, for a scribe. When he learned I was literate, he offered it to me.”

They looked out over the blue waters, the bobbing boats, the sea gulls—and decided to stay.



The curtains of their cottage billowed in the sea breeze. Naamah was unpacking groceries. Shlomo—garbed in a Mirfan gown and tasseled cap—was stretched out on the couch, reading a scroll.

He lowered the scroll and said: “There’s something I’ve



been meaning to tell you.”

“What would that be?”

“Do you recall that morning when we met with your father? And he expressed his wish that you marry someone like King Solomon? And I said that I was Solomon?”

“How could I forget that? Of all the foolish things to say! How could you be so flippant at such a moment?”

“I wasn’t being flippant. I am King Solomon.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am King Solomon.”

She put down the groceries and stared at him.

And Shlomo told her the entire story. He described the treachery of Asmodeus—how the jinni had flung him to Arabia and taken his place. He told of his wandering as a beggar. And he explained that regaining his throne would not be a simple matter.

“But surely you’re going to try?” said Naamah.

“Let me tell you something,” said Shlomo. “I had wealth and power, a palatial residence, hundreds of wives. A truly regal life-style. And frankly, it was all growing burdensome. Everything had its downside. Take the palace, for instance. It was a huge, impersonal place. In the corridors I was always passing people I didn’t know. Or take my wives...*please!* They quarreled among themselves and vied for my attention. My official duties also became burdensome. As king I had to make policy decisions, administer justice, read reports. These tasks were time-consuming and tiresome. I had discharged my prime obligation to GOD—the building of the Temple; and everything thereafter seemed anticlimactic. As I got up each morning and trudged to the throne, I began

to feel like someone with a routine job. Moreover, how much longer would I occupy that throne? Like any kingdom, Israel had its internal rivalries and intrigues. All of which I had to deal with and worry about.

“But look at me now, consigned to so-called exile. I lead a simple and satisfying life. I have a loving wife—just one! I have a cozy cottage with a view of the harbor. I have a job that is interesting—daily conversations with sailors from around the world—and that pays enough to let me buy scrolls. And there’s no one trying to take it away from me! So why should I want to regain my throne? The rich and powerful Solomon? I’d rather be Shlomo.”

“And your former life—your kingdom, your people, your responsibilities? You’re just going to let them go?”

“Those years as king are like a dream now—a fading memory. Israel is a faraway land. This is where I belong, and where I’m going to stay.”



So they settled into their new life. Shlomo rose in the morning, downed his gruel, and walked to his job at the custom house. Naamah did the marketing and cooking. She also took up painting; and the walls of their cottage were soon filled with seascapes and still lifes. And they made friends among their neighbors—though never mentioning their royal origins.

The years passed. And three daughters were born to the couple. To accommodate his growing family, Shlomo learned carpentry and added a wing to the cottage. It included a household shrine.

The shrine was dedicated to a number of gods. Shlomo prayed to GOD Most High; while Naamah called on Chemosh. But they raised their daughters to honor both deities, and a few local ones as well. When Naamah asked if the priests in Jerusalem would have tolerated such a shrine, Shlomo replied: “Those wives of mine brought with them the gods of their native lands. The priests allowed them to worship freely, since they were foreigners.”

“Do you miss the Temple?”

Shlomo shrugged. “GOD Most High is everywhere. Though He was especially present in the Holy of Holies. And the Temple was a wonder to behold.”

And he sighed deeply—for all that he had left behind in Jerusalem.



Shlomo climbed the gangway and boarded the ship. A Phoenician freighter, it was bound for Persia with a load of cedar wood. He was greeted by the captain, who welcomed him with a handshake and gave him a tour of the ship.

When the cargo had been inspected and certified, the two men chatted. The captain mentioned a stopover for repairs in Jaffa, during which he had rented a donkey, traveled inland, and visited Jerusalem. Shlomo asked him about King Solomon.

“Solomon?” said the captain with a chuckle. “Now there’s a case. The fellow is unbelievable! He leads a life of utter indulgence. I visited the palace and got to see him in action—lounging on his throne. King Solomon presides over a never-ending party. He is constantly surrounded by scantily-clad women, who fawn on him—refill his goblet—whisper jokes in his ear. And the man goes about in pajamas, night and day. Throughout the palace there’s music and drinking and licentiousness—a veritable bacchanal! Every ne’er-do-well in the land has gravitated to the court, to join in the merrymaking. And King Solomon has welcomed them.

“On occasion, he turns his attention to matters of state. He’ll read a report, make a wry comment about it, dash off a decree, and return to his pleasures. Sometimes he’ll listen to a lawsuit—and deliver an absurd judgment. In one instance that I heard about, two women appeared before him with a bawling infant. Each claimed to be its mother. King Solomon listened to their testimony. Then he asked to see the birth certificate. When neither woman was able to produce one, he nodded sagely and said: ‘I have an equitable solution to this dispute. Let a birth certificate be drawn up for the child. *Then give the child to one woman and the birth certificate to the other.* Each award has its advantages. The child, being cute and cuddly, will serve as

an object of maternal affection. The birth certificate, for its part, will require no effort or expense. Nor will it ever disappoint, as the child may—no lack of respect or filial ingratitude. And it's an official document. Congratulations, ladies.'

"Can you imagine this man as chief magistrate of a country? And worse yet as its ruler? To be sure, for day-to-day governance he relies on a vizier. But whom did he appoint to the post? A bumpkin named Borak—a former manservant! This Borak manages to keep the kingdom afloat, though just barely. Several times, I was told, his diplomatic gaffs had brought Israel to the brink of war. Yet for all his shortcomings, Borak is a popular vizier—on account of the giveaways that he has initiated. For example, there's a government-sponsored program called 'Ale for All.' You can simply walk into any tavern and drink your fill. 'It's completely free,' Borak boasts, 'just like in the Garden of Eden.'

"I asked people their opinion of King Solomon. And they just shook their heads. About ten years ago, they told me, his character had undergone an abrupt change. Previously, he had been known for his wisdom. Thereafter, it was for his wisecracks. And he had once been extremely pious. Now he made remarks that bordered on blasphemy. Unaccountably, his whole attitude—even his facial expression—had changed. He was like a different person.

"This new outlook was evident in a book that he wrote. He had it widely disseminated, and even peddled it himself in the marketplace. It was titled *Ecclesiastes: A Treatise for the Edification of My Subjects*. The book had a clear message—that life is transitory and should therefore be given over to pleasure. 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,' insisted King Solomon. 'Therefore, eat, drink, and be merry.' I have a copy in my cabin. You can borrow it, if you wish."

"Yes, I would like to read it."

The captain leaned forward and peered at Shlomo. "You know something?" he said. "You bear a resemblance to King Solomon. You look just like the man. But wait here—I'll get you the book."*

* Traditionally, the Book of Ecclesiastes has been attributed to King Solomon. Yet its rationalism—its irreligious sentiments—



When Shlomo returned home, Naamah was cooking dinner in the kitchen. The three girls were playing out in the yard. He plopped down on the couch, opened the book, and began to read.

“Appalling,” he murmured.

When he had finished the book, Shlomo lay on the couch and brooded. Finally he rose and joined Naamah in the kitchen. She was frying a fish.

“You know that jinni—Asmodeus—whom I told you about? Who has been impersonating me and occupying the throne? Today I heard a report about him. He has been behaving abominably and blackening my name. And he has published—under my name—a scandalous work. One that scoffs at religion and advocates a hedonistic life-style. How could I have allowed this to happen?”

“You had no choice.”

“Sure I did. I could have gone back and sought to reclaim my throne. It might have been futile; but I should have tried. I wonder—is it too late now? Or can I still return to Jerusalem and expose that fake? Tell me, how would you feel about living there? As the wife of King Solomon?”

“And those other wives of yours? Several hundred, I believe? Would you be reclaiming them as well?”

“Asmodeus can keep them.”

Just then his daughters came prancing into the house. Singing and cavorting, they passed through the kitchen.

Shlomo listened as they played in the front room. And

its seeming despair—are hard to reconcile with his celebrated piety and building of the Temple. Various explanations have been offered for this discongruity. One is that Solomon wrote the book in his later years, after his foreign wives had turned his heart away from GOD. Another is that it was written during the Hellenistic era, under the influence of Greek philosophy. The explanation offered here—that its author was Asmodeus, masquerading as Solomon—is intriguing. If true, the book would be the sole known literary work of a jinni.

Computer analysis of the text—its diction, tone, linguistic peculiarities, etc.—is currently being conducted, and may resolve the question.

he came to a decision.

“No, we’re staying in Mirfa,” he said. “My life is here—a new life that I vastly prefer to the old. Israel will have to make do with an impostor.”

“Good,” said Naamah, turning over the fish. And she announced that dinner would be ready soon.



Shlomo and his daughters were finishing dessert. He was bantering and laughing with them. Naamah emerged from the kitchen, with something in her hand.

“When I was preparing the fish,” she said, “I found this inside. Can you imagine? It must have been swallowed by the fish.”

She handed Shlomo a ring. He stared at it incredulously.

“That’s my ring,” he said. “The one that Asmodeus tossed into the sea. Ten years ago!”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. It was one of a kind. What a fluke of fortune.”

He held it up to the light. And tentatively—as if to see if it still fit—he slipped the ring onto his finger.

Instantly, the scene about him began to fade. Naamah, the girls, the dining table, the room—everything dissolved and disappeared.

And he found himself seated at a small table with a chessboard on it. Across from him was Asmodeus. They were sitting on the roof of the palace.

“So,” said Asmodeus, “you had enough of my illusion. But it was convincing, was it not? I was the very image of you. A mirror of your features, if not your virtues.”

“How did I get here?” cried Solomon. “What have you done?”

“Why, nothing. What’s the matter?”

“I was with my family. I was in my house. And suddenly I’m with you again. By what sorcery did you bring me here? And why, you scoundrel, after so many years?”

“What are you talking about, Solomon?”

“Ten years ago you got me to remove my ring. Then you

assumed my appearance, flung me to a distant land, and took my place on the throne. Now you've brought me back, for some reason. But I don't wish to be back."

"Ten years ago?" said Asmodeus, with a look of puzzlement. "But it's only been a few minutes since you removed the ring. And I neither flung you to a distant land nor took your place. All I did was to take on your appearance—an illusion that you have dispelled by putting the ring back on."

"A few minutes?" said Solomon, staring at him in disbelief. "Don't be ridiculous. I've been gone for years. I've been living in Arabia. I found a new life there."

Asmodeus slapped himself. "O my goodness," he said. "I see what must have happened. You experienced my illusion—and went beyond it. *You created your own illusion.* As we sat here, you imagined *an entire life* for yourself. And experienced it as reality—day by day, year after year. I had no idea. Believe me, such was not my intention. O my goodness!"

Solomon looked down at his clothing. Royal attire had replaced the Mirfan gown. He reached up to touch his cap—and felt a crown. He looked out at the rooftops of Jerusalem, shadowy in the twilight. And he moaned.

"You mean it was all a dream? My wife and daughters were mere phantasms? And those years in Arabia were an elaborate fantasy? A fabrication of my mind? You're saying that my family is gone now—indeed, that it never was?"

"Alas," said Asmodeus, "your life in Arabia was not real. Although real desires must have inspired it. After all, it was you, not I, who created that illusion. Surely it arose from the depths of your soul—from your deepest needs. But in the end, you rejected it. *You reached out and retrieved your ring.* You chose to return to reality and to your duties as king. And look at the plus side of what happened. You've added ten years to your life! Illusory years—yet they seem to have been profoundly satisfying."

"But it's all gone, like a bubble that burst. Everything that was precious to me. There's nothing left but memories."

“This world too is a bubble that bursts,” said Asmodeus. “One’s life shall come to an abrupt end. One’s achievements shall be forgotten. One’s toil and trouble shall have been in vain. That’s why one must live for the moment.”

But Solomon was not listening. As if taken by a fever, he had begun to shake and to moan. He wobbled to his feet, knocking over the table and scattering the chess pieces.

And King Solomon howled. He let out a primal cry that resounded from the rooftops and echoed from the hills. Then he fell to his knees and sobbed.

Asmodeus was looking remorseful. “What did I inadvertently bring about?” he said. “I feel terrible. How can I make amends? I know.”

He pronounced a name and clicked his fingers. A blue jinni appeared with a pop.

“Solomon, this is Potah,” said Asmodeus. “He’s the jinni of forgetfulness. Just give the word and he’ll erase those memories. You’ll have no remembrance of those imagined years in Arabia—and thus no sense of loss.”

“Leave me be,” whispered Solomon.

Asmodeus clicked his fingers and Potah vanished. Then, with a shrug of helplessness, Asmodeus too disappeared with a pop.

And Solomon was left alone, kneeling and weeping atop his palace.