

# **FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE**



**FIFTY FAMOUS  
PEOPLE**

*A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES*

**BY**

**JAMES BALDWIN**

**YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS**

**CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA**

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## **PREFATORY NOTE**

ONE of the best things to be said of the stories in this volume is that, although they are not biographical, they are about real persons who actually lived and performed their parts in the great drama of the world's history. Some of these persons were more famous than others, yet all have left enduring "footprints on the sands of time" and their names will not cease to be remembered. In each of the stories there is a basis of truth and an ethical lesson which cannot fail to have a wholesome influence; and each possesses elements of interest which, it is believed, will go far towards proving the fallibility of the doctrine that children find delight only in tales of the imaginative and unreal. The fact that there are a few more than fifty famous people mentioned in the volume may be credited to the author's wish to give good measure.



## CONTENTS

SAVING THE BIRDS .....	1
ANOTHER BIRD STORY .....	5
SPEAKING A PIECE.....	8
WRITING A COMPOSITION.....	12
THE WHISTLE.....	16
THE ET'TRICK SHEPHERD .....	19
THE CALIPH AND THE POET .....	24
“BECOS! BECOS! BECOS!” .....	26
A LESSON IN HUMILITY .....	30
THE MIDNIGHT RIDE.....	33
THE BOY AND THE WOLF.....	39
ANOTHER WOLF STORY .....	44
THE HORSESHOE NAILS .....	48
THE LANDLORD’S MISTAKE.....	52
A LESSON IN MANNERS .....	55
GOING TO SEA .....	58
THE SHEPHERD-BOY PAINTER.....	60
TWO GREAT PAINTERS .....	64
THE KING AND THE BEES.....	66
OUR FIRST GREAT PAINTER.....	69
THE YOUNG SCOUT.....	73
THE LAD WHO RODE SIDESADDLE.....	77
THE WHISPERERS.....	80
HOW A PRINCE LEARNED TO READ .....	85
“READ, AND YOU WILL KNOW” .....	89
THE YOUNG CUPBEARER .....	91

## CONTENTS

THE SONS OF THE CALIPH.....	96
THE BOY AND THE ROBBERS.....	98
A LESSON IN JUSTICE.....	102
THE GENERAL AND THE FOX.....	106
THE BOMB .....	109
A STORY OF OLD ROME.....	110
SAVED BY A DOLPHIN.....	115
“LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE AIR” .....	120
A CLEVER SLAVE.....	123
ONE OF ÆSOP’S FABLES .....	126
THE DARK DAY.....	127
THE SURLY GUEST.....	130
THE STORY OF A GREAT STORY .....	133
THE KING AND THE PAGE .....	140
THE HUNTED KING.....	143
“TRY, TRY AGAIN!” .....	147
WHY HE CARRIED THE TURKEY.....	149
THE PADDLE-WHEEL BOAT.....	152
THE CALIPH AND THE GARDENER.....	156
THE COWHERD WHO BECAME A POET.....	162
THE LOVER OF MEN .....	168
THE CHARCOAL MAN AND THE KING .....	172
WHICH WAS THE KING?.....	181
THE GOLDEN TRIPOD.....	183





## SAVING THE BIRDS

ONE day in spring four men were riding on horseback along a country road. These men were lawyers, and they were going to the next town to attend court.

There had been a rain, and the ground was very soft. Water was dripping from the trees, and the grass was wet.

The four lawyers rode along, one behind another; for the pathway was narrow, and the mud on each side of it was deep. They rode slowly, and talked and laughed and were very jolly.

As they were passing through a grove of small trees, they heard a great fluttering over their heads and a feeble chirping in the grass by the roadside.

“Stith! stith! stith!” came from the leafy branches above them.

“Cheep! cheep! cheep!” came from the wet grass.

“What is the matter here?” asked the first lawyer, whose name was Speed.

## *FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*

“Oh, it’s only some old robins!” said the second lawyer, whose name was Hardin. “The storm has blown two of the little ones out of the nest. They are too young to fly, and the mother bird is making a great fuss about it.”

“What a pity! They’ll die down there in the grass,” said the third lawyer, whose name I forget.

“Oh, well! They’re nothing but birds,” said Mr. Hardin. “Why should we bother?”

“Yes, why should we?” said Mr. Speed.

The three men, as they passed, looked down and saw the little birds fluttering in the cold, wet grass. They saw the mother robin flying about, and crying to her mate.

Then they rode on, talking and laughing as before. In a few minutes they had forgotten about the birds.

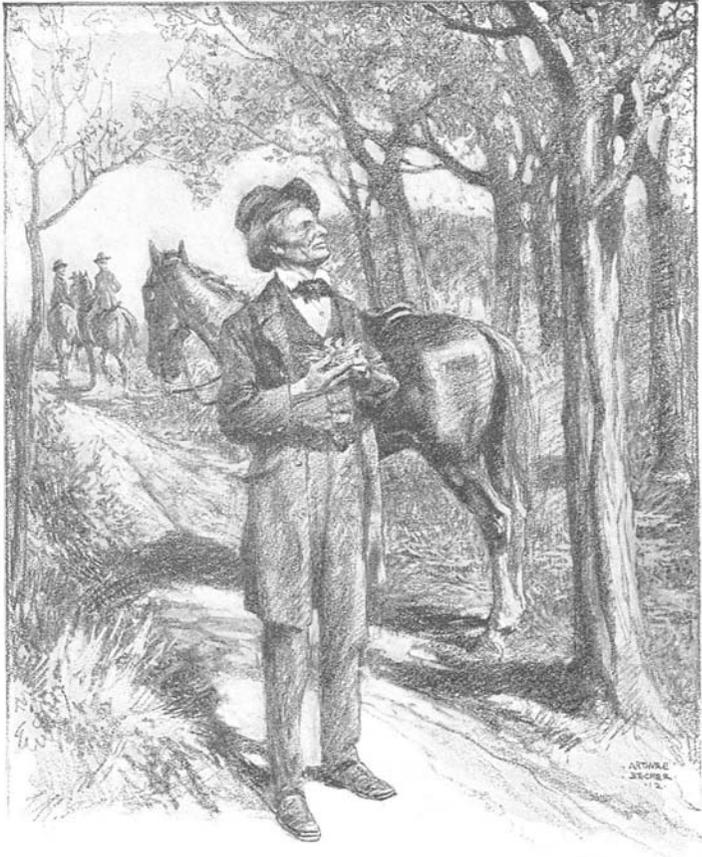
But the fourth lawyer, whose name was Abraham Lincoln, stopped. He got down from his horse and very gently took the little ones up in his big warm hands.

They did not seem frightened, but chirped softly, as if they knew they were safe.

“Never mind, my little fellows,” said Mr. Lincoln. “I will put you in your own cozy little bed.”

Then he looked up to find the nest from which they had fallen. It was high, much higher than he could reach.

## SAVING THE BIRDS



But Mr. Lincoln could climb. He had climbed many a tree when he was a boy.

He put the birds softly, one by one, into their warm little home. Two other baby birds were there, that had not fallen out. All cuddled down together and were very happy.

## *FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*

Soon the three lawyers who had ridden ahead stopped at a spring to give their horses water.

“Where is Lincoln?” asked one.

All were surprised to find that he was not with them.

“Do you remember those birds?” said Mr. Speed. “Very likely he has stopped to take care of them.”

In a few minutes Mr. Lincoln joined them. His shoes were covered with mud; he had torn his coat on the thorny tree.

“Hello, Abraham!” said Mr. Hardin. “Where have you been?”

“I stopped a minute to give those birds to their mother,” he answered.

“Well, we always thought you were a hero,” said Mr. Speed. “Now we know it.”

Then all three of them laughed heartily. They thought it so foolish that a strong man should take so much trouble just for some worthless young birds.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Lincoln, “I could not have slept to-night, if I had left those helpless little robins to perish in the wet grass.”

Abraham Lincoln afterwards became very famous as a lawyer and statesman. He was elected president. Next to Washington he was the greatest American.

## **ANOTHER BIRD STORY**

A GREAT battle had begun. Cannon were booming, some far away, some near at hand. Soldiers were marching through the fields. Men on horseback were riding in haste toward the front.

“Whiz!” A cannon ball struck the ground quite near to a company of soldiers. But they marched straight onward. The drums were beating, the fifes were playing.

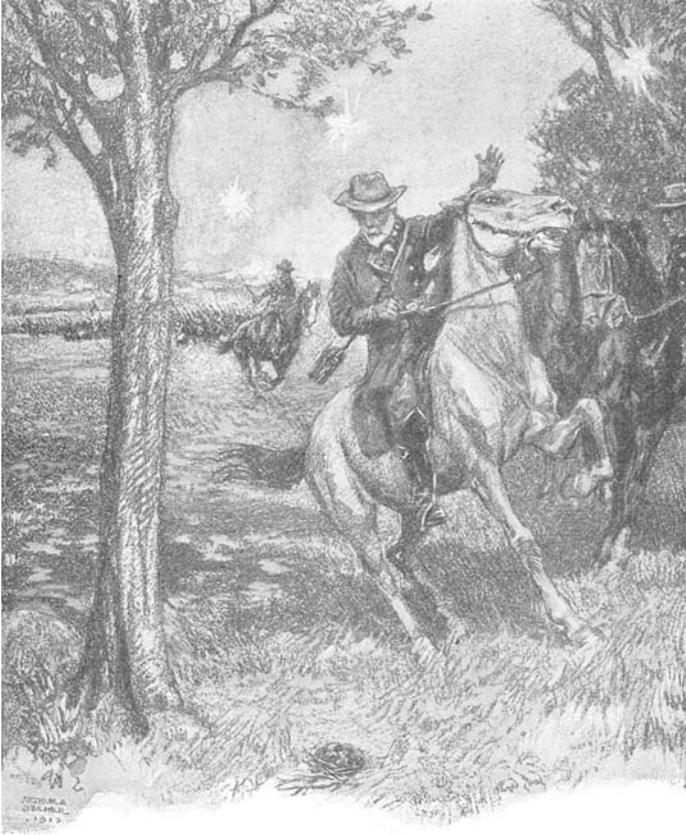
“Whiz!” Another cannon ball flew through the air and struck a tree near by. A brave general was riding across the field. One ball after another came whizzing near him.

“General, you are in danger here,” said an officer who was riding with him. “You had better fall back to a place of safety.”

But the general rode on.

Suddenly he stopped at the foot of a tree. “Halt!” he cried to the men who were with him. He leaped from his horse. He stooped and picked up a bird’s nest that had fallen upon the ground. In the nest were some tiny, half-fledged birds. Their

*FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*



mouths were open for the food they were expecting their mother to give them.

“I cannot think of leaving these little things here to be trampled upon,” said the general.

He lifted the nest gently and put it in a safe place in the forks of the tree.

“Whiz!” Another cannon ball.

## *ANOTHER BIRD STORY*

He leaped into the saddle, and away he dashed with his officers close behind him.

“Whiz! whiz! whiz!”

He had done one good deed. He would do many more before the war was over.

“Boom! boom! boom!”

The cannon were roaring, the balls were flying, the battle was raging. But amid all the turmoil and danger, the little birds chirped happily in the safe shelter where the great general, Robert E. Lee, had placed them.

“He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.”

## **SPEAKING A PIECE**

TWO children, brother and sister, were on their way to school. Both were very small. The boy was only four years old, and the girl was not yet six.

“Come, Edward, we must hurry,” said the sister. “We must not be late.”

With one hand the little boy clung to his sister’s arm, and with the other he held his primer.

This primer was his only book, and he loved it. It had a bright blue cover, which he was careful not to soil. And in it were some odd little pictures, which he never grew tired of looking at.

Edward could spell nearly all the words in his primer, and he could read quite well.

The school was more than a mile from their home, and the children trotted along as fast as their short legs could carry them.

At a place where two roads crossed, they saw a tall gentleman coming to meet them. He was dressed in black, and had a very pleasant face.

## *SPEAKING A PIECE*

“Oh, Edward, there is Mr. Harris!” whispered the little girl. “Don’t forget your manners.”

They were glad to see Mr. Harris, for he was the minister. They stopped by the side of the road and made their manners. Edward bowed very gracefully, and his sister curtsied.

“Good morning, children!” said the minister; and he kindly shook hands with both.



## FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE

“I have something here for little Edward,” he said. Then he took from his pocket a sheet of paper on which some verses were written.

“See! It is a little speech that I have written for him. The teacher will soon ask him to speak a piece at school, and I am sure that he can learn this easily and speak it well.”

Edward took the paper and thanked the kind minister.

“Mother will help him learn it,” said his sister.

“Yes, I will try to learn it,” said Edward.

“Do so, my child,” said the Minister; “and I hope that when you grow up you will become a wise man and a great orator.”

Then the two children hurried on to school.

The speech was not hard to learn, and Edward soon knew every word of it. When the time came for him to speak, his mother and the minister were both there to hear him.

He spoke so well that everybody was pleased. He pronounced every word plainly, as though he were talking to his schoolmates.

Would you like to read his speech? Here it is:—

Pray, how shall I, a little lad,  
In speaking make a figure?  
You're only joking, I'm afraid—  
Just wait till I am bigger.

## *SPEAKING A PIECE*

But since you wish to hear my part,  
    And urge me to begin it,  
I'll strive for praise with all my heart,  
    Though small the hope to win it.

I'll tell a tale how Farmer John  
    A little roan colt bred, sir,  
Which every night and every morn  
    He watered and he fed, sir.

Said Neighbor Joe to Farmer John,  
    “You surely are a dolt, sir,  
To spend such time and care upon  
    A little useless colt, sir.”

Said Farmer John to Neighbor Joe,  
    “I bring my little roan up  
Not for the good he now can do,  
    But will do when he's grown up.”

The moral you can plainly see,  
    To keep the tale from spoiling,  
The little colt you think is me—  
    I know it by your smiling.

And now, my friends, please to excuse  
    My lisping and my stammers;  
I, for this once, have done my best,  
    And so—I'll make my manners.

The little boy's name was Edward Everett. He grew up to become a famous man and one of our greatest orators.

## WRITING A COMPOSITION

“CHILDREN, to-morrow I shall expect all of you to write compositions,” said the teacher of Love Lane School. “Then, on Friday those who have done the best may stand up and read their compositions to the school.”

Some of the children were pleased, and some were not.

“What shall we write about?” they asked.

“You may choose any subject that you like best,” said the teacher.

Some of them thought that “Home” was a good subject. Others liked “School.” One little boy chose “The Horse.” A little girl said she would write about “Summer.”

The next day, every pupil except one had written a composition.

“Henry Longfellow,” said the teacher, “why have you not written?”

“Because I don’t know how,” answered Henry. He was only a child.

## WRITING A COMPOSITION

“Well,” said the teacher, “you can write words, can you not?”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy.

“After you have written three or four words, you can put them together, can you not?”

“Yes, sir; I think so.”

“Well, then,” said the teacher, “you may take your slate and go out behind the schoolhouse for half an hour. Think of something to write about, and write the word on your slate. Then try to tell what it is, what it is like, what it is good for, and what is done with it. That is the way to write a composition.”

Henry took his slate and went out. Just behind the schoolhouse was Mr. Finney’s barn. Quite close to the barn was a garden. And in the garden, Henry saw a turnip.

“Well, I know what that is,” he said to himself; and he wrote the word *turnip* on his slate. Then he tried to tell what it was like, what it was good for, and what was done with it.

Before the half hour was ended he had written a very neat composition on his slate. He then went into the house, and waited while the teacher read it.

The teacher was surprised and pleased. He said, “Henry Longfellow, you have done very well. Tomorrow you may stand up before the school and read what you have written about the turnip.”

## FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE

Many years after that, some funny little verses about Mr. Finney's turnip were printed in a newspaper. Some people said that they were what Henry Longfellow wrote on his slate that day at school.

But this was not true. Henry's composition was not in verse. As soon as it was read to the school, he rubbed it off the slate, and it was forgotten.

Perhaps you would like to read those funny verses. Here they are; but you must never, *never*, NEVER think that Henry Longfellow wrote them.

Mr. Finney had a turnip,  
    And it grew, and it grew;  
It grew behind the barn,  
    And the turnip did no harm.

And it grew, and it grew,  
    Till it could grow no taller;  
Then Mr. Finney took it up,  
    And put it in the cellar.

There it lay, there it lay,  
    Till it began to rot;  
Then Susie Finney washed it  
    And put it in a pot.

She boiled it, and boiled it,  
    As long as she was able;  
Then Mrs. Finney took it,  
    And put it on the table.

*WRITING A COMPOSITION*

Mr. Finney and his wife  
Both sat down to sup;  
And they ate, and they ate,  
They ate the turnip up.

All the school children in our country have heard of Henry W. Longfellow. He was the best loved of all our poets. He wrote "The Village Blacksmith," "The Children's Hour," and many other beautiful pieces which you will like to read and remember.

## THE WHISTLE

TWO hundred years ago there lived in Boston a little boy whose name was Benjamin Franklin.

On the day that he was seven years old, his mother gave him a few pennies.

He looked at the bright, yellow pieces and said, "What shall I do with these coppers, mother?"

It was the first money that he had ever had.

"You may buy something, if you wish," said his mother.

"And then will you give me more?" he asked.

His mother shook her head and said: "No, Benjamin. I cannot give you any more. So you must be careful not to spend these foolishly."

The little fellow ran into the street. He heard the pennies jingle in his pocket. How rich he was!

Boston is now a great city, but at that time it was only a little town. There were not many stores.

As Benjamin ran down the street, he wondered what he should buy. Should he buy candy?

## THE WHISTLE

He hardly knew how it tasted. Should he buy a pretty toy?

If he had been the only child in the family, things might have been different. But there were fourteen boys and girls older than he, and two little sisters who were younger.

What a big family it was! And the father was a poor man. No wonder the lad had never owned a toy.

He had not gone far when he met a larger boy, who was blowing a whistle.

“I wish I had that whistle,” he said.

The big boy looked at him and blew it again. Oh, what a pretty sound it made!

“I have some pennies,” said Benjamin. He held them in his hand, and showed them to the boy. “You may have them, if you will give me the whistle.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, all of them.”

“Well, it’s a bargain,” said the boy; and he gave the whistle to Benjamin, and took the pennies.

Little Benjamin Franklin was very happy; for he was only seven years old. He ran home as fast as he could, blowing the whistle as he ran.

“See, mother,” he said, “I have bought a whistle.”

“How much did you pay for it?”

## *FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*

“All the pennies you gave me.”

“Oh, Benjamin!”

One of his brothers asked to see the whistle.

“Well, well!” he said. “You’ve paid a dear price for this thing. It’s only a penny whistle, and a poor one at that.”

“You might have bought half a dozen such whistles with the money I gave you,” said his mother.

The little boy saw what a mistake he had made. The whistle did not please him any more. He threw it upon the floor and began to cry.

“Never mind, my child,” said his mother, very kindly. “You are only a very little boy, and you will learn a great deal as you grow bigger. The lesson you have learned to-day is never to pay too dear for a whistle.”

Benjamin Franklin lived to be a very old man, but he never forgot that lesson.

Every boy and girl should remember the name of Benjamin Franklin. He was a great thinker and a great doer, and with Washington he helped to make our country free. His life was such that no man could ever say, “Ben Franklin has wronged me.”

# THE ETTRICK SHEPHERD

## I

IN Scotland there once lived a poor shepherd whose name was James Hogg. His father and grandfather and great-grandfather had all been shepherds.

It was his business to take care of the sheep which belonged to a rich landholder by the Ettrick Water. Sometimes he had several hundreds of lambs to look after. He drove these to the pastures on the hills and watched them day after day while they fed on the short green grass.

He had a dog which he called Sirrah. This dog helped him watch the sheep. He would drive them from place to place as his master wished. Sometimes he would take care of the whole flock while the shepherd was resting or eating his dinner.

One dark night James Hogg was on the hilltop with a flock of seven hundred lambs. Sirrah was with him. Suddenly a storm came up. There was thunder and lightning; the wind blew hard; the rain poured.

## *FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*

The poor lambs were frightened. The shepherd and his dog could not keep them together. Some of them ran towards the east, some towards the west, and some towards the south.

The shepherd soon lost sight of them in the darkness. With his lighted lantern in his hand, he went up and down the rough hills calling for his lambs.

Two or three other shepherds joined him in the search. All night long they sought for the lambs.

Morning came and still they sought. They looked, as they thought, in every place where the lambs might have taken shelter.

At last James Hogg said, "It's of no use; all we can do is to go home and tell the master that we have lost his whole flock."

They had walked a mile or two towards home, when they came to the edge of a narrow and deep ravine. They looked down, and at the bottom they saw some lambs huddled together among the rocks. And there was Sirrah standing guard over them and looking all around for help.

"These must be the lambs that rushed off towards the south," said James Hogg.

The men hurried down and soon saw that the flock was a large one.

"I really believe they are all here," said one.

## THE ETTRICK SHEPHERD



They counted them and were surprised to find that not one lamb of the great flock of seven hundred was missing.

How had Sirrah managed to get the three scattered divisions together? How had he managed to drive all the frightened little animals into this place of safety?

Nobody could answer these questions. But there was no shepherd in Scotland that could have done better than Sirrah did that night.

## FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE

Long afterward James Hogg said, "I never felt so grateful to any creature below the sun as I did to Sirrah that morning."

### II

WHEN James Hogg was a boy, his parents were too poor to send him to school. By some means, however, he learned to read; and after that he loved nothing so much as a good book.

There were no libraries near him, and it was hard for him to get books. But he was anxious to learn. Whenever he could buy or borrow a volume of prose or verse he carried it with him until he had read it through. While watching his flocks, he spent much of his time in reading.

He loved poetry and soon began to write poems of his own. These poems were read and admired by many people.

The name of James Hogg became known all over Scotland. He was often called the Ettrick Shepherd, because he was the keeper of sheep near the Ettrick Water.

Many of his poems are still read and loved by children as well as by grown up men and women. Here is one:—

## *THE ETTRICK SHEPHERD*

### A BOY'S SONG

Where the pools are bright and deep,  
Where the gray trout lies asleep,  
Up the river and o'er the lea,  
That's the way for Billy and me.

Where the blackbird sings the latest,  
Where the hawthorn blooms the sweetest,  
Where the nestlings chirp and flee,  
That's the way for Billy and me.

Where the mowers mow the cleanest,  
Where the hay lies thick and greenest,  
There to trace the homeward bee,  
That's the way for Billy and me.

Where the hazel bank is steepest,  
Where the shadow falls the deepest,  
Where the clustering nuts fall free,  
That's the way for Billy and me.

Why the boys should drive away,  
Little maidens from their play,  
Or love to banter and fight so well,  
That's the thing I never could tell.

But this I know, I love to play  
In the meadow, among the hay—  
Up the water, and o'er the lea,  
That's the way for Billy and me.

## THE CALIPH AND THE POET

ONCE upon a time there was a famous Arab whose name was Al Mansur. He was the ruler of all the Arabs, and was therefore called the caliph.

Al Mansur loved poetry and was fond of hearing poets repeat their own verses. Sometimes, if a poem was very pleasing, he gave the poet a prize.

One day a poet whose name was Thalibi came to the caliph and recited a long poem. When he had finished, he bowed, and waited, hoping that he would be rewarded.

“Which would you rather have,” asked the caliph, “three hundred pieces of gold, or three wise sayings from my lips?”

The poet wished very much to please the caliph. So he said, “Oh, my master, everybody should choose wisdom rather than wealth.”

The caliph smiled, and said, “Very well, then, listen to my first wise saying: When your coat is worn out, don’t sew on a new patch; it will look ugly.”

## THE CALIPH AND THE POET

“Oh, dear!” moaned the poet. “There go a hundred gold pieces all at once.”

The caliph smiled again. Then he said, “Listen now to my second word of wisdom. It is this: When you oil your beard, don’t oil it too much, lest it soil your clothing.”

“Worse and worse!” groaned the poor poet. “There go the second hundred. What shall I do?”

“Wait, and I will tell you,” said the caliph; and he smiled again. “My third wise saying is—”

“O caliph, have mercy!” cried the poet. “Keep the third piece of wisdom for your own use, and let me have the gold.”

The caliph laughed outright, and so did every one that heard him. Then he ordered his treasurer to pay the poet five hundred pieces of gold; for, indeed, the poem which he had recited was wonderfully fine.

The caliph, Al Mansur, lived nearly twelve hundred years ago. He was the builder of a famous and beautiful city called Bagdad.

## **“BECOS! BECOS! BECOS!”**

THOUSANDS of years ago the greatest country in the world was Egypt.

It was a beautiful land lying on both sides of the wonderful river Nile. In it were many great cities; and from one end of it to the other there were broad fields of grain and fine pastures for sheep and cattle.

The people of Egypt were very proud; for they believed that they were the first and oldest of all nations.

“It was in our country that the first men and women lived,” they said. “All the people of the world were once Egyptians.”

A king of Egypt, whose name was Psammeticus, wished to make sure whether this was true or not. How could he find out?

He tried first one plan and then another; but none of them proved anything at all. Then he called his wisest men together and asked them, “Is it really true that the first people in the world were Egyptians?”

*“BECOS! BECOS! BECOS!”*

They answered, “We cannot tell you, O King; for none of our histories go back so far.”

Then Psammeticus tried still another plan.

He sent out among the poor people of the city and found two little babies who had never heard a word spoken. He gave these to a shepherd and ordered him to bring them up among his sheep, far from the homes of men.

“You must never speak a word to them,” said the king; “and you must not permit any person to speak in their hearing.”

The shepherd did as he was bidden. He took the children far away to a green valley where his flocks were feeding. There he cared for them with love and kindness; but no word did he speak in their hearing.

They grew up healthy and strong. They played with the lambs in the field and saw no human being but the shepherd.

Thus two or three years went by. Then, one evening when the shepherd came home from a visit to the city, he was delighted to see the children running out to meet him. They held up their hands, as though asking for something, and cried out, “Becos! becos! becos!”

The shepherd led them gently back to the hut and gave them their usual supper of bread and milk. He said nothing to them, but wondered where they had heard the strange word “becos,” and what was its meaning.

## FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE



After that, whenever the children were hungry, they cried out, “Becos! becos! becos!” till the shepherd gave them something to eat.

Some time later, the shepherd went to the city and told the king that the children had learned to speak one word, but how or from whom, he did not know.

“What is that word?” asked the king.

“Becos.”

Then the king called one of the wisest scholars in Egypt and asked him what the word meant.

“*BECOS! BECOS! BECOS!*”

“Becos,” said the wise man, “is a Phrygian word, and it means *bread*.”

“Then what shall we understand by these children being able to speak a Phrygian word which they have never heard from other lips?” asked the king.

“We are to understand that the Phrygian language was the first of all languages,” was the answer. “These children are learning it just as the first people who lived on the earth learned it in the beginning.”

“Therefore,” said the king, “must we conclude that the Phrygians were the first and oldest of all the nations?”

“Certainly,” answered the wise man.

And from that time the Egyptians always spoke of the Phrygians as being of an older race than themselves.

This was an odd way of proving something, for, as every one can readily see, it proved nothing.

## A LESSON IN HUMILITY

ONE day the caliph, Haroun-al-Raschid, made a great feast. The feast was held in the grandest room of the palace. The walls and ceiling glittered with gold and precious gems. The table was decorated with rare and beautiful plants and flowers.

All the noblest men of Persia and Arabia were there. Many wise men and poets and musicians had also been invited.

In the midst of the feast the caliph called upon the poet, Abul Atayah, and said, "O prince of verse makers, show us thy skill. Describe in verse this glad and glorious feast."

The poet rose and began: "Live, O caliph and enjoy thyself in the shelter of thy lofty palace."

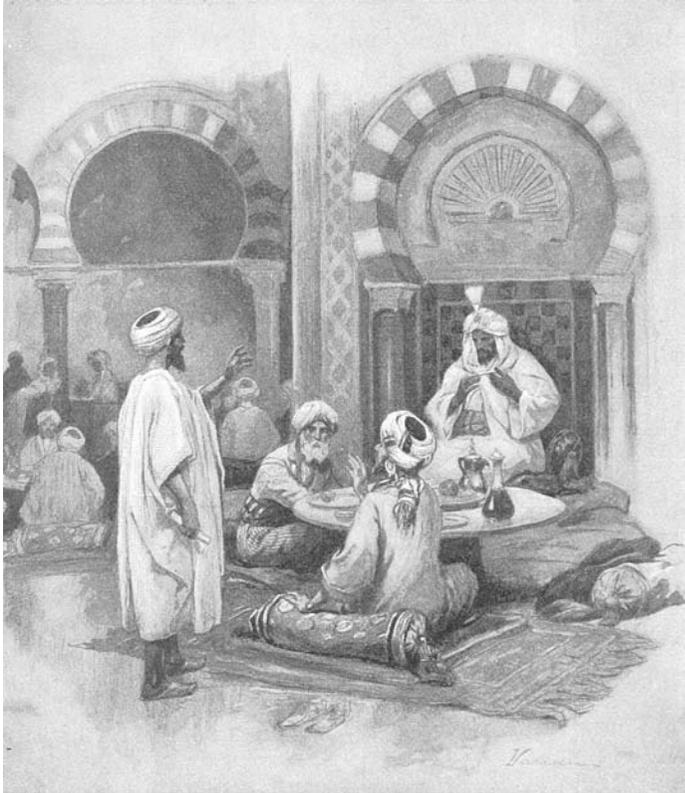
"That is a good beginning," said Raschid. "Let us hear the rest."

The poet went on: "May each morning bring thee some new joy. May each evening see that all thy wishes have been performed."

"Good! good!" said the caliph, "Go on."

## A LESSON IN HUMILITY

The poet bowed his head and obeyed: “But when the hour of death comes, O my caliph, then alas! thou wilt learn that all thy delights were but a shadow.”



The caliph's eyes were filled with tears. Emotion choked him. He covered his face and wept.

Then one of the officers, who was sitting near the poet, cried out: “Stop! The caliph wished you to

## *FIFTY FAMOUS PEOPLE*

amuse him with pleasant thoughts, and you have filled his mind with melancholy.”

“Let the poet alone,” said Raschid. “He has seen me in my blindness, and is trying to open my eyes.”

Haroun-al-Raschid (Aaron the Just) was the greatest of all the caliphs of Bagdad. In a wonderful book, called “The Arabian Nights,” there are many interesting stories about him.