MINOR PIECES.

MAHMOUD.[1]*

I have just read a most amazing thing,
A true and noble story of a king:[2]
And to show all men, by these presents, how
Good kings can please a Liberal,[3] even now
I'll vent the warmth it gave me in a verse:
But recollect—these kings and emperors
Are very scarce; and when they do appear,
Had better not have graced that drunken sphere,[4]
Which hurts the few whose brains can bear it best,
And turns the unhappy heads of all the rest.
This prince was worthy to have ruled a state
Plain as his heart, and by its freedom great:
But stripped of their gilt stuff, at what would t'others rate?

There came a man,[5] making his hasty moan,
Before the Sultan Mahmoud on his throne,
And crying out—"My sorrow is my right,
And I *will* see the Sultan, and to-night."
"Sorrow," said Mahmoud, "is a reverend thing:
I recognize its right, as king with king;
Speak on." "A fiend has got into my house,"
Exclaimed the staring man, "and tortures us:
One of thine officers—he comes, the abhorr'd,
And takes possession of my house, my board,

* Author: Leigh Hunt / Transcribed and annotated by Alessandra Crotti.

My bed:—I have two daughters and a wife,
And the wild villain comes and makes me mad with life."
"Is he there now?" said Mahmoud:—"No;—he left
The house when I did, of my wits bereft;
And laugh'd me down the street, because I vowed
I'd bring the prince himself to lay him in his shroud.
I'm mad with want—I'm mad with misery
And, oh thou Sultan Mahmoud, God cries out for thee!"

The Sultan comforted the man, and said,
"Go home, and I will send thee wine and bread,"
(For he was poor) "and other comforts. Go;
And, should the wretch return, let Sultan Mahmoud know."

In three days' time, with haggard eyes and beard,
And shaken voice, the suitor re-appeared,
And said "He's come."—Mahmoud said not a word,
But rose and took four slaves, each with a sword,
And went with the vexed man. They reach the place,
And hear a voice, and see a female face,
That to the window fluttered in affright:
"Go in," said Mahmoud, "and put out the light;[6]
But tell the females first to leave the room;
And, when the drunkard follows them, we come."

The man went in. There was a cry, and hark!
A table falls, the window is struck dark:
Forth rush the breathless women; and behind
With curses comes the fiend in desperate mind.
In vain: the sabres soon cut short the strife,
And chop the shrieking wretch, and drink his bloody life.

"Now *light* the light," the Sultan cried aloud.

'Twas done, he took it in his hand, and bowed
Over the corpse, and looked upon the face;
Then turned and knelt beside it in the place,
And said a prayer, and from his lips there crept
Some gentle words of pleasure, and he wept.
In reverend silence the spectators wait,
Then bring him at his call both wine and meat;
And when he had refreshed his noble heart,
He bade his host be blest, and rose up to depart.

The man amazed, all mildness now, and tears,
Fell at the Sultan's feet, with many prayers,
And begged him to vouchsafe to tell his slave,
The reason first of that command he gave
About the light; then, when he saw the face,
Why he knelt down; and lastly, how it was,
That fare so poor as his detained him in the place.

The Sultan said, with much humanity,
"Since first I saw thee come, and heard thy cry,
I could not get it from my head, that one
By whom such daring villanies were done,
Must be some lord of mine, perhaps a lawless son.
Whoe'er he was, I knew my task, but feared
A father's heart, in case the worst appeared:
For this I had the light put out; but when
I saw the face, and found a stranger slain,
I knelt and thanked the sovereign arbiter,
Whose work I had performed through pain and fear;
And then I rose, and was refreshed with food,
The first time since thou cam'st, and marr'dst my solitude.

EDITORIAL NOTES

[1] Mahmoud the Gaznevide or Mahmoud of Ghazni (971–1030), Sultan of the Ghaznavid Empire, is celebrated in Persian and Arabic sources and later depicted in Europe as both a conqueror and a model of magnanimity.

[2] The tale of Sultan Mahmoud appears in the tenth volume of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789). Gibbon acknowledges his debt for this character and story to Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697), which also served as a source for Leigh Hunt. From the same work, Hunt selected eight verses, translated them, and published them as a separate poem entitled "A Blessed Spot".

[3] Allusion to Hunt's own radical political identity.

[4] Image of the corrupt and irrational human world, echoing both classical Stoic and Romantic moral cosmology (see, for instance, William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* V.i.72.)

[5] Episode found in Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, entry "Mahmoud." D'Herbelot's version tells how the Sultan personally avenged a poor man whose house had been invaded by a soldier. Hunt closely follows this outline but expands the emotional and psychological dimension.

[6] William Shakespeare, *Othello* V.ii.7.