



ARABIAN WISDOM

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Global Grey ebooks

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SELECTIONS AND TRANSLATIONS FROM THE ARABIC

BY
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1913

Arabian Wisdom by John Wortabet.

This edition was created and published by Global Grey

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MARRIAGE

The advantages of marriage are purity of life, children, pleasures of home, and the happiness of exertion for the comfort of wife and children.

This life is a joy, and its greatest delight is a good wife.

An honourable marriage is a stepping-stone to honour.

Take a wife not for her beauty, but for her virtues.

Chastity united to beauty makes a wife perfect.

Three things contribute to long life—a large house, an obedient wife, and a swift horse.

The violence of love vanishes soon after marriage. If the love of bride and bridegroom were to endure, the Resurrection Day would be at hand.

A man has no portion in the love of women when he becomes grey, or when he loses his fortune.

The lover's eye is blind.

The disgrace of a woman is abiding.

Take the high-road, though it turn; and marry a woman of good birth, though she may have been passed by.

Women are the snares of Satan.

Happy is the woman who dies before her husband.

It is better to have a thousand enemies out of the house than one in it.

The girl who has many suitors, and makes no choice of one of them, is doomed to become an old maid.

CHILDREN

Children are a gift from God.

A child is a flower which has come down from Paradise.

Nothing is dearer than a child, except a grandchild.

When your son is young, train him; when he is grown, make a brother of him.

That child is loved most who is young until he is grown up, or sick until he recovers, or absent until he returns home.

Your riches and your children are a temptation to you (*Koran*).

Happy is the woman who has first daughters, then sons.

If you do not train up your child, time will do it.

The training of children is like chewing stones.

Your riches and children are your enemies—beware of them (*Koran*).

The joy of parents in their children prolongs life.

Sorrow for a child is a burning fire in the heart.

He who is not tender to his child shall find no tenderness in God to him.

Your children are not too many for Death, nor is your money too much for a rapacious governor.

FILIAL DUTY

When your father and mother become old, and you take them into your house, say not a word of impatience to them, nor rebuke them, but speak graciously, and be humble to them, and say: "O my God, be merciful to them, even as they tended me when I was young" (*Koran*).

Be dutiful to your father, and your son shall be dutiful to you.

He who is ill-mannered to his father will be ill-treated by his son.

The good-will of parents procures the good-will of God.

The central gate of heaven is open to the man who has been dutiful to his parents.

Paradise is open at the command of mothers.

You, and all that you have, belong to your father.

A daughter is always proud of her father.

An unmarried daughter has a broken wing.

BROTHERS, RELATIONS

A man who has no brother is like one who has a left arm and no right. A brother is a wing.

When evil befalls you, you will know the value of a brother.

Your brother is he who shares your distress.

The same regard is due to the eldest brother from the youngest as that which is due to a parent from his child.

God helps him who helps his brother. Who forsakes his brother will be forsaken by God.

A man is a mirror in which his brother's likeness is seen.

The best man among you is he who is best to his relations.

Blood does not become water.

Honour your tribe, for they are the wing with which you fly.

The measure of a man's greatness is that of his tribe (clan, party).

Be friendly to your relations, but do not depend on your relationship.

If it were not for my own arm, my mouth would have nothing to eat.

FRIENDS, COMPANIONS

A friend is a second self and a third eye.

A true man is he who remembers his friend when he is absent, when he is in distress, and when he dies.

A friend is known only in adversity.

If your friend is sweet, do not eat him up.

If you would keep a friend, do not lend him money nor borrow from him.

Keep to your old friends—your new friends will not be so constant.

You may find in a friend a brother who was not born of your mother.

The noblest man is he whose friendship may be easily obtained, and whose enmity can be incurred only with difficulty.

He is a weak man who can make no friends, and still weaker is he who loses them. When my vine was laden with grapes, my friends were many; when the grapes were finished, my friends disappeared.

Friendship may come down by inheritance from ancestors, and so may hatred.

Nothing makes us feel so lonely as solitude, and nothing makes us so cheerful as freedom from evil companions.

Without human companions, Paradise itself would be an undesirable place to live in.

A man's character is judged by the character of his companions.

Smoke is no less an evidence of fire than that a man's character is that of the character of his associates.

He who associates with a suspected person will himself be suspected.

NEIGHBOURS

He is a good man who is a good neighbour.

No man enters heaven who is a bad neighbour.

A good neighbour is he who is not only harmless, but bears harm with patience.

Be friends, but do not become neighbours.

In social life be as friends, in business as strangers.

Prefer a near neighbour to a distant brother.

SALUTATION, VISITING

Return a salutation by something better, or at least by something as good (Koran).

A warm greeting renews friendship.

Respect is due to a visitor.

The best of men is a rich man who visits the poor, and the worst is a poor man who visits the rich.

Go a mile to see a sick man, go two miles to make peace between two men, and go three miles to call on a friend.

Make your visits short, especially to the sick.

To visit too often is tiresome to your friends, and to visit too rarely is less than what is due to friendship.

Your calls will be best appreciated when they are seasonable and not too frequent.

Too much familiarity is a cause of coolness among friends.

Do not associate much with men; if you do, shut your eyes to their faults, and bear consequent trouble.

LOVE OF COUNTRY AND HOME

Love of one's own country is a religious duty.

A true man yearns towards his native country, and longs for his home as a lion longs for his lair.

It is a sign of sound judgment when the heart craves for country and home.

He is better to suffer hardship in one's own country than to enjoy ease in a foreign land.

God blesses the land which is loved by its people.

As a nurse who has brought you up, has a special claim on you, so has your country.

He is an unwise man who alienates himself from his country and home.

If it were not for love of country, unhappy lands would be desolate.

It is an honour to you to love the land and house where you were born.

An old man is most comfortable in his own house.

TRAVELLING

In travelling you will find health and profit.

If water stagnates long it becomes foul.

A roaming dog is better than a couching lion.

During a journey a man's character is weighed and revealed.

The day on which a journey is begun is half the journey done.

HEALTH

Health is a crown on the head of the hale, invisible except to the sick.

Sound health is beyond all price.

The greatest gift to man is a long healthy life.

If there be anything more valuable than life, it is sound health.

It is wonderful that the envious see not the blessing of good health.

No man appreciates the worth of health until he is afflicted with disease.

If your dinner is light, your dreams will be pleasant.

So long as the head is free from trouble, the body will be sound.

YOUTH AND OLD AGE

An old man among his people is like a prophet sent from God.

To venerate old age is to revere God.

Youth is a kind of madness.

The wisest young men are they who follow the good example of the old, and the most foolish old men are they who follow the bad example of the young.

It is the duty of every one to be tender to the young and respectful to the old.

An old man should not give up his old habits, nor take to new ones.

An old man speaks of what he has seen, and a young man speaks of what he has heard.

Grey hairs are a sign of wisdom, and are beautified by reverence.

A hoary head is a rich cream churned by long years.

Grey hairs are a message from the other world.

After old age there is nothing but infirmity or death.

An old man cries out, "O that youth would return for a day, that I might relate to it what the roll of years has done to me!"

The hair often becomes white, not from the succession of years, but from a succession of evils.

Life is a parting shadow and youth a departing guest.

When a young man says he is hungry, believe him; but when he says he is tired, do not believe him.

DEATH

All life ends in death.

When I see all paths leading men unto death, and no paths leading from death unto us—no traveller there ever returning—not one of ages past ever remaining—I see that I also shall assuredly go where they have gone.

If death be surely inevitable, be not a fool and die a coward's death.

Death is a cup which every man must drink, and the grave a door which every man must enter.

If we are hastening to death, why all this impatience with the ills of life?

This life is a sleep, the life to come is a waking; the intermediate step between them is death, and our life here is a disturbed dream.

He who dreads the causes of death, they will surely seize him—do what he will to evade them.

Death, so far as one can see, strikes at random, killing the man whom he hits, and leaving the man whom he misses to old age and decrepitude.

Death covers all faults.

APPENDIX

WHAT IS RIGHTEOUSNESS?

"Righteousness is not that ye turn your faces [in prayer] to the east or west; but righteousness is to him who believeth in God and the Last Day, and Angels, and Revealed Books, and Prophets; who giveth cheerfully from his substance to kinsmen, orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, and to them that ask; who freeth the prisoner and the slave; who offereth prayers at their appointed times, and giveth the ordained alms; to them who fulfil the covenants to which they have bound themselves, and who are patient in times of distress, and pain, and struggle: these are they who are sincere [in religion], and who fear to do evil (Koran 2, 172)."

This fine passage from the Koran is considered by Moslem commentators as the most comprehensive statement of the duties of man: "Sound faith, a good social life, and right culture of the soul" (El-Beidaway).

Instructions of Ali Ibn-abi Talib, the first Khalif to his son—"My son, fear God both secretly and openly; speak the truth, whether you be calm or angry; be economical, whether you be poor or rich; be just to friend and foe; be resigned alike in times of adversity and prosperity. My son, he who sees his own faults has no time to see the faults of others; he who is satisfied with the allotments of Providence does not regret the past; he who unsheaths the sword of aggression will be killed by it; he who digs a pit for his brother will fall into it; he who forgets his own sin makes much of the sin of another; he who takes to evil ways will be despised; he who commits excesses will be known to do them; he who associates with the base will be subject to constant suspicion; he who remembers death will be content with little in this world; he who boasts of his sins before men, God will bring him to shame."

THE EXPERIENCES OF AN OLD MAN

"I have heard many sermons and had many counsels, but I have heard no preacher so effective as my grey hairs, and no counsellor so effectual as the

voice of my own conscience. I have eaten the most choice food, and drunk the best kinds of wine, and enjoyed the love of the most beautiful women; but I found no pleasure so great as that of sound health. I have swallowed the bitterest food and drink, but I found nothing so bitter as poverty. I have worked at iron and carried heavy weights, but I found no burden so heavy as that of debt. I have sought wealth in all its forms, but found no riches so great as those of contentment."

EIGHT MEN WHO DESERVE TO BE SLAPPED ON THE FACE

He who despises a man of power; he who enters a house uninvited and unwelcomed; he who gives orders in a house not his own; he who takes a seat above his position; he who speaks to one who does not listen to him; he who intrudes on the conversation of others; he who seeks favours from the ungenerous; and he who expects love from his enemies.

FORBEARANCE

The following story is related by Arabian authors of Ma'an Ibn-Zaidah, who, from a humble origin, rose to be Governor of Irak. The story is probably not altogether historical, but it shows the high ideal of Arab moralists as regards forbearance and gentleness.

An Arab of the desert, who had heard much of the great gentleness of Ibn-Zaidah, came one day to try him. Entering abruptly into his presence he addressed him thus (in verse):

"Rememberest thou when thy bed-covering was a sheepskin and thy sandals made of camel-skin?"

Ma'an answers (in prose): Yes, I remember, and I have not forgotten it.

The Arab. Praise be to God, who hath given thee a great rule, and taught thee how to sit on a throne!

Ma'an. Yes, praise to Him in every condition of life!

Arab. Never shall I greet Ma'an as an emir should be greeted!

Ma'an. Greeting is an ordinance among Arabs in which you are free to take what form you like.

Arab. An Emir who eats sweet pastry in secret, and entertains his guest with barley bread!

Ma'an. The food is our own: we eat what we like and give others what we like.

Arab. I shall leave a land in which thou dwellest, and depart, though the hand of Fortune is hard upon me.

Ma'an. Brother Arab, if thou stay, thou art welcome; and if thou depart, peace go with thee.

Arab. Son of shame, give me something for my journey, for I have decided to go.

Ma'an (to his treasurer): Give him a thousand pieces of money.

Arab. Noble prince, I have heard much of thy great forbearance, and came only to try thee. Thy gentleness is indeed very great, and has no like among men. I pray God that thy life may be long, and thy forbearance be ever a noble example to which men may look up!

TRUTHFULNESS TO TRUST

The following historical incident is related by Arab authors as the highest example of faithfulness to trust. Al-Samau'al (Samuel) was the emir of a Jewish tribe in Southern Arabia, shortly before the time of Mohammed. A friend of his, before setting out on a journey, left with him some very fine mailed armour. This friend was killed in a battle, and one of the kings of Syria demanded the arms. Al-Samau'al refused to give them up except to the rightful heir, and the king laid siege to him in one of his fortresses. One day his son fell into the hands of the enemy, and the king threatened to kill him if the arms were not given up. Again he refused, and from the turrets of the castle saw his son put to death. The siege was soon after raised, and the arms were delivered to the heirs of his friend.

TRUTHFULNESS TO PLEDGE

The terms of surrender at the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin, in 1187, were that the Crusaders should retire with their goods from that city to one of the garrisoned ports which were held by the Franks, on the payment of ten pieces of gold for each man. As they were filing out of the city, and handing in their ransom-money, Saladin and his generals looked on, watching the proceedings. The patriarch's turn came, and he was followed by a number of mules laden with much treasure. Saladin made no sign, but his generals said: "Sire, the conditions of surrender were for private property, not for such treasures of money, which we urgently need for carrying on the war." To this appeal he replied: "No, I have pledged my word, and for the ten pieces of gold agreed upon he shall be free."

But just as he was so strictly truthful to his word, he was equally severe in exacting the same truthfulness from his foes. Thus after the great battle of Hittin, when the Crusading army was utterly crushed, a large number of prisoners fell into his hands, including the King of Jerusalem and Count Raymond de Chatillon, Governor of Kerak, to the east of the Jordan. The count was a bad, dishonourable man, and had (not long before) shamelessly violated an armistice, and fallen on a defenceless Moslem caravan which was passing through his province, killing the men and seizing their property. When Saladin heard of this base breach of the laws of war he was furious, and vowed that if this perfidious prince should ever fall into his power, he would kill him with his own hand; and now the count was his prisoner. The day of battle, in the month of August, had been very hot, and the Crusaders, with their heavy coats of mail, and without a drop of water to drink, had suffered terribly from thirst. The tents of Saladin were pitched near the Lake of Tiberias, and when the king and the count were brought in, the king asked for a drink of water—which Saladin at once ordered. A large goblet of iced water was handed to him, and after quenching his thirst he passed the cup to the count. Saladin looked on, but said nothing until the count had finished drinking, and he then said to him: "I gave no orders for drink for you; if I had, your life would have been safe by our laws of hospitality. But you are a bad, faithless man, who broke the terms of our truce, and you shall now suffer the death which you deserve," and with one stroke of his scimitar he cut off his head. He then sent for the Knights of St. John, of whom there were about a thousand prisoners, and said to them: "So far as

you have been brave warriors, and cost the Moslems many a man, I have nothing to say; but you have not been fair and honourable in our wars, nor true to your engagements, and I now offer you the option of Islam or death." To a man they all chose death in preference to adopting a faith which they hated; and so they were led to the shores of the lake and there beheaded.

More than seven hundred years after these tragic events, William II., the present Emperor of Germany, who is a descendant of the Crusading Princes, and a Knight of the Brandenburg branch of the order of St. John, came to Damascus in 1898; and one of the first things he did there was to visit the tomb of Saladin, and lay on it a wreath of flowers. It was a generous and beautiful and well-deserved tribute to the memory of a truly great man, from whom the Christian nations of his times learned much of their chivalry and truthfulness to their pledged word.

A THANKFUL OLD MAN

Two old men, who had been friends in early youth, met after an interval of many years. A cordial greeting ensued, and then one of them asked the other: "How old are you now?" He said: "Thank God, I am in good health." "Are you well-off in worldly goods?" "Thank God, I am in debt to no man." "Have you any special trouble of mind?" "Thank God, I have no young children." "Have you any enemies?" "Thank God, I have no near relations."

THE THREE SORTS OF HAPPY MEN

In two verses of poetry, Al-Mutanabbi, one of the greatest Arabian poets and philosophers, reduces the number of happy men to three classes. They have been paraphrased and put into English verse by a friend, as follows:

To three life seems a summer sky:
The first who has no mind to know
The heights and depths of life below,
Nor ever asks the reason why.

The second he to whom life's sum
 Is self at ease; who never lets
 The past disturb with dark regrets,
 Nor hopes and fears from days to come.

The third who, led by fancies crude,
 In scorn of truth, deceived at heart,
 Makes fruitless dreams his better part,
 And hollow hopes the highest good.

CYNICAL VIEWS OF LIFE

Abu'l-Ala was another great poet-philosopher. He lost his sight from small-pox early in life, was a cynic and pessimist, and may have often been copied by Omar Khayyam. He refers to his affliction and to the fact that he lived and died an unmarried man (so as to have no children) in a well-known verse:

"Here am I—wronged by my father
 Who gave me birth—while I have done wrong to no one."

Some of his poetry has been put into English quatrains by Ameen F. Rihany, in imitation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, and the following, from the *Quatrains of Abu'l-Ala*, are a few striking examples:

"What boots it, in my creed, that man should moan
 In Sorrow's Night, or sing in Pleasure's Dawn?
 In vain the doves all coo on yonder branch,
 In vain one sings or sobs: lo! he is gone.

So solemnly the Funeral passes by!
 The march of Triumph, under this same sky.
 Trails in its course—both vanish into Night:
 To me are one, the Sob, the Joyous Cry.

Many a grave embraces friend and foe,
 And grins in scorn at this most sorry show;

A multitude of corpses passed therein—
Alas! Time almost reaps e'er he doth sow!

How oft around the Well my Soul would grope
Athirst; but lo! my Pail was without Rope:
I cried for Water, and the deep, dark Well
Echoed my wailing cry, but not my hope.

The door of What-May-Be none can unlock,
But we can knock and guess, and guess and knock:
Night sets her glittering sail, and glides along,
Ship-like; but where, O Night-ship, is thy dock?

Oh, when will Fate come forth with his decree,
That I might clasp the cool clay, and be free?
My Soul and Body, wedded for a while,
Are sick, and would that separation be.

If miracles were wrought in bygone years,
Why not to-day, why not to-day, O seers?
This Leprous Age most needs a healing hand,
Oh, why not heed his cries, and dry his tears?"

MISCELLANEOUS PROVERBS

He who treats you as he treats himself does you no injustice.

He who lives on expectations dies in poverty.

Three things are no disgrace to man—to serve his guest, to serve his horse,
and to serve in his own house.

Extremes are a mistake—a middle course is the best.

When the cooks are many the food is spoiled. When a ship has two captains
it will sink.

Tie the ass where his owner wants.

Be a slave to truth—the slave to truth is a freeman.

No bravery in war can withstand overwhelming numbers.

If God gives you, give you to others.

A horseman has ever an open grave before him.

Confide not in a friend until you have tried him, and fight no enemy until you have sufficient power.

A prudent man is right though he perisheth, and a reckless man is wrong though he cometh out safely.

Trust not in present prosperity, for it is a departing guest.

Reserve the white coin for the black day.

If it be in your power to do harm to your enemy—do it not, but forgive him and win his thanks.

The eye cannot contend with pointed steel.

Be cautious even where you are most sure.

Poverty is a chain which restrains men from doing much evil.

If you would know what a man hath, look not to what he gains but to what he spends.

Nothing can be concealed except that which is not.

The best friend is he who changeth not with the changes of time.

Every rule has exceptions.

The most unjust man to himself is he who humbles himself to one who hates him, and he who praises one whom he does not know.

When you do a kindness, make a small thing of it, though it be a great; and when you receive a kindness, make much of it, though it be small.

Idle hands are unclean.

This world is honey mixed with poison—a joy inseparable from sorrow.

If you are ignorant, inquire; if you stray, return; if you do wrong, repent; and if you are angry, restrain yourself.
