

# The Diwan of Abu'l-Ala eBook

## The Diwan of Abu'l-Ala

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## EDITORIAL NOTE

The object of the Editors of this series is a very definite one. They desire above all things that, in their humble way, these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West—the old world of Thought and the new of Action. In this endeavour, and in their own sphere, they are but followers of the highest example in the land. They are confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour. Finally, in thanking press and public for the very cordial reception given to the “Wisdom of the East” Series, they wish to state that no pains have been spared to secure the best specialists for the treatment of the various subjects at hand.

L. Cranmer-Byng.  
S. A. Kapadia.

Northbrook society,  
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## INTRODUCTION TO THE DIWAN

God help him who has no nails wherewith to scratch himself.  
*Arabian proverb.*

An effort has been made to render in this book some of the poems of Abu'l-Ala the Syrian, who was born 973 years after Jesus Christ and some forty-four before Omar Khayyam. But the life of such a man—his triumph over circumstance, the wisdom he achieved, his unconventionality, his opposition to revealed religion, the sincerity of his religion, his interesting friends at Baghdad and Ma'arri, the multitude of his disciples, his kindliness and cynic pessimism and the reverence which he enjoyed, the glory of his meditations, the renown of his prodigious memory, the fair renown of bending to the toil of public life, not to the laureateship they pressed upon him, but the post of being spokesman at Aleppo for the troubles of his native villagers,—the life of such a one could not be told within the space at our command; it will, with other of his poems, form the subject of a separate volume. What appears advisable is that we should devote this introduction to a commentary on the poems here translated; which we call a “diwan,” by the way, because they are selected out of all his works. A commentary on the writings of a modern poet is supposed to be superfluous, but in the days of Abu'l-Ala of Ma'arri you were held to pay the highest compliment if, and you were yourself a poet, you composed a commentary on some other poet's work. Likewise you were held to be a thoughtful person if you gave the world a commentary on your own productions; and Abu'l-Ala did not neglect to write upon his *Sikt al-Zand* (“The Falling Spark of Tinder”)

and his *Lozum ma la Yalzam* ("The Necessity of what is Unnecessary"), out of which our diwan has been chiefly made. But his elucidations



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have been lost. And we—this nobody will contradict—have lost the old facility. For instance, Hasan ibn Malik ibn Abi Obaidah was one day attending on Mansur the Chamberlain, and he displayed a collection of proverbs which Ibn Sirri had made for the Caliph's delectation. "It is very fine," quoth Mansur, "but it wants a commentary." And Hasan in a week returned with a commentary, very well written, of three hundred couplets. One other observation: we shall not be able to present upon these pages a connected narrative, a dark companion of the poem, which is to the poem as a shadow to the bird. A mediaeval Arab would have no desire to see this theory of connection put in practice—no, not even with a poem; for the lines, to win his admiration, would be as a company of stars much more than as a flying bird. Suppose that he produced a poem of a hundred lines, he would perchance make fifty leaps across the universe. But if we frown on such discursiveness, he proudly shows us that the hundred lines are all in rhyme. This Arab and ourselves—we differ so profoundly. "Yet," says he, "if there existed no diversity of sight then would inferior merchandise be left unsold." And when we put his poem into English, we are careless of the hundred rhymes; we paraphrase—"Behold the townsmen," so cried one of the Bedawi, "they have for the desert but a single word, we have a dozen!"—and we reject, as I have done, the quantitative metre, thinking it far preferable if the metre sings itself into an English ear, as much as possible with that effect the poet wants to give; and we oppose ourselves, however unsuccessfully, to his discursiveness by making alterations in the order of the poem. But in this commentary we shall be obliged to leap, like Arabs, from one subject to another. And so let us begin.

With regard to prayer (*quatrain 1*), the Moslem is indifferent as to whether he perform this function in his chamber or the street, considering that every spot is equally pure for the service of God. And yet the Prophet thought that public worship was to be encouraged; it was not a vague opinion, because he knew it was exactly five-and-twenty times more valuable than private prayer. It is related of al-Muzani that when he missed being present in the mosque he repeated his prayers twenty-five times. "He was a diver for subtle ideas," said the biographer Ibn Khallikan. And although our poet, quoting the Carmathians, here deprecates the common worship, he remarks in one of his letters that he would have gone to mosque on Fridays if he had not fallen victim to an unmentionable complaint. . . . The pre-Islamic Arabs were accustomed to sacrifice sheep (*quatrain 1*) and other animals in Mecca and elsewhere, at various stones which were regarded as idols or as altars of the gods.[1] Sometimes they killed a human being, such as the four hundred captive nuns of whom we read that they were sacrificed by al-Mundhir to the goddess Aphrodite. Sheep are



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offered up to-day in Palestine: for instance, if the first wife of a man is barren and the second wife has children, then the former vows that in return for a son she will give a lamb. Apparently when it was thought desirable to be particularly solemn a horse was sacrificed, and this we hear of with the Persians, Indians, and more western people. White was held to be the favourable colour, so we read in Herodotus (i. 189) that the Persians sacrificed white horses. In Sweden it was thought that a black lamb must be dedicated to the water sprite before he would teach any one to play the harp. As for the subsequent fate of the victim, Burton tells us that the Moslems do not look with favour on its being eaten. Unlike them, Siberian Buriats will sacrifice a sheep and boil the mutton and hoist it on a scaffold for the gods, and chant a song and then consume the meat. So, too, the zealous devil-worshippers of Travancore, whose diet is the putrid flesh of cattle and tigers, together with arrak and toddy and rice, which they have previously offered to their deities.

The words of Abu'l-Ala concerning day and night (*quatrain 2*) may be compared with what he says elsewhere:

These two, young for ever,  
Speed into the West—  
Our life in their clutches—  
And give us no rest.

“Generation goeth and generation cometh,” says Ecclesiastes, “while for ever the earth abideth. The sun riseth also and the sun goeth down and cometh panting back to his place where he riseth.” . . . The early dawn, the time of scarlet eyes, was also when the caravan would be attacked. However, to this day the rising sun is worshipped by the Bedawi, despite the prohibition of Mahomet and despite the Moslem dictum that the sun rises between the devil’s horns. Now the divinity of the stars (*quatrain 4*) had been affirmed by Plato and Aristotle; it was said that in the heavenly bodies dwelt a ruling intelligence superior to man’s, and more lasting.[2] And in Islam, whose holy house, the Kaaba, had traditionally been a temple of Saturn, we notice that the rationalists invariably connect their faith with the worship of Venus and other heavenly bodies. We are told by ash-Shahrastani, in his *Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*, that the Indians hold Saturn for the greatest luck, on account of his height and the size of his body. But such was not Abu'l-Ala’s opinion. “As numb as Saturn,” he writes in one of his letters,[3] “and as dumb as a crab has every one been struck by you.” Elsewhere he says in verse:

If dark the night, old Saturn is a flash  
Of eyes which threaten from a face of ash.



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And the worship of Saturn, with other deities, is about a hundred years later resented by Clotilda, says Gregory of Tours, when she is moving Chlodovich her husband to have their son baptized. When the little boy dies soon after baptism, the husband does not fail to draw a moral. But misfortunes, in the language of an Arab poet, cling about the wretched even as a coat of mail (*quatrain* 6) is on the warrior. This image was a favourite among the Arabs, and when Ibn Khallikan wants to praise the verses of one As Suli, he informs us that they have the reputation of delivering from sudden evil any person who recites them frequently. When this evil is complete, with rings strongly riven, it passes away while he thinks that nothing can dispel it. . . . We have mention in this quatrain of a winding-sheet, and that could be of linen or of damask. The Caliph Solaiman was so fond of damask that every one, even the cook, was forced to wear it in his presence, and it clothed him in the grave. Yet he, like other Moslems (*quatrain* 10), would believe that he must undergo the fate recorded in a book. The expression that a man's destiny is written on his forehead, had its origin without a doubt, says Goldziher, in India. We have remarked upon the Indian ideas which had been gathered by Abu'l-Ala at Baghdad. There it was that he enjoyed the opportunity of seeing ships (*quatrain* 11). He spent a portion of his youth beside the sea, at Tripoli. But in the capital were many boats whose fascination he would not resist,— the Chinese junks laboriously dragged up from Bassora, and dainty gondolas of basket-work covered with asphalt.[4] However, though in this place and in others, very frequently, in fact, Abu'l-Ala makes mention of the sea, his fondness of it was, one thinks, for literary purposes. He writes a letter to explain how grieved he is to hear about a friend who purposes to risk himself upon the sea, and he recalls a certain verse: "Surely it is better to drink among the sand-heaps foul water mixed with pure than to venture on the sea." From Baghdad also he would carry home the Zoroastrian view (*quatrain* 14) that night was primordial and the light created. As a contrast with these foreign importations, we have reference (*quatrain* 15) to the lute, which was the finest of Arabian instruments. They said themselves that it was invented by a man who flourished in the year 500 B.C. and added an eighth string to the lyre. Certainly the Arab lute was popular among the Greeks: [Greek: arabion ar ego kekineka aulon], says Menander. It was carried to the rest of Europe by crusaders at the beginning of the twelfth century, about which time it first appears in paintings, and its form persisted till about a hundred years ago.[5] But with regard to travels (*quatrain* 18), in the twenty-seventh letter of Abu'l-Ala, "I observe," says he, "that you find fault with travelling. Why so? Ought not a man to be satisfied with



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following the precedent set by Moses, who, when he turned towards Midyan, said, "Maybe the Lord will guide me?" (Koran 28, 21). Should a man be satisfied with what he hears from the philosopher al-Kindi? "In any single existing thing, if it is thoroughly known, we possess," he said, "a mirror in which we may behold the entire scheme of things" (*quatrain* 20). The same philosopher has laid it down that, "Verily there is nothing constant in this world of coming and going (*quatrain* 24), in which we may be deprived at any moment of what we love. Only in the world of reason is stability to be found. If then we desire to see our wishes fulfilled and would not be robbed of what is dear to us, we must turn to the eternal blessings of reason, to the fear of God, to science and to good works. But if we follow merely after material possessions in the belief that we can retain them, we are pursuing an object which does not really exist." . . . And this idea of transitoriness prevails so generally among the Arabs that the salad-seller recommends his transitory wares to pious folk by calling, "God is that which does not pass away!" So, too, the Arab pictures as a bird, a thing of transience, the human soul. In Syria the dove is often carved upon their ancient tombstones. And the Longobards among their graves erected poles in memory of kinsfolk who had died abroad or had been slain in battle; on the summit of the pole was a wooden image of a dove, whose head was pointed in the direction where the loved one lay buried. With us, as with Abu'l-Ala (*quatrain* 26), the soul may metaphorically be imagined as a bird, but for the European's ancestor it was a thing of sober earnest, as it is to-day to many peoples. Thus the soul of Aristeas was seen to issue from his mouth in the shape of a raven.[6] In Southern Celebes they think that a bridegroom's soul is apt to fly away at marriage, wherefore coloured rice is scattered over him to induce it to remain. And, as a rule, at festivals in South Celebes rice is strewed on the head of the person in whose honour the festival is held, with the object of detaining his soul, which at such times is in especial danger of being lured away by envious demons.[7] . . . This metaphor was used by Abu'l-Ala in the letter which he wrote on the death of his mother: "I say to my soul, 'This is not your nest, fly away.'" And elsewhere (*quatrain* 34) Death is represented as a reaper. Says Francis Thompson:

The goodly grain and the sun-flushed sleeper  
The reaper reaps, and Time the reaper.

It is interesting to find Death also called a sower, who disseminates weeds among men: "Do der Tot sinen Samen under si gesoete."



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It was an ancient custom of the Arabs when they took an oath of special significance to plunge their hands into a bowl of perfume and distribute it among those who took part in the ceremony. Of the perfumes, musk (*quatrain* 38) was one which they affected most. Brought commonly from Turkistan, it was, with certain quantities of sandalwood and ambra, made into a perfume. And “the wounds of him who falls in battle and of the martyrs,” said Mahomet, “shall on the Day of Judgment be resplendent with vermilion and odorous as musk.” This was repeated by Ibnol Faradhi, who in the Kaaba entreated God for martyrdom and, when this prayer was heard, repented having asked. . . . This quatrain goes on to allude to things which can improve by being struck. There is in the third book of a work on cookery (so rare a thing, they tell us, that no MS. of it exists in England or in any other country that can be heard of) an observation by the eighteenth-century editor to the effect that it is a vulgar error to suppose that walnut-trees, like Russian wives, are all the better for a beating; the long poles and stones which are used by boys and others to get the fruit down, for the trees are very high, are used rather out of kindness to themselves than with any regard to the tree that bears it. This valued treatise, we may mention, is ascribed to Coelius Apicius; its science, learning, and discipline were extremely condemned, and even abhorred by Seneca and the Stoics. . . . Aloes-wood does not emit a perfume until it is burned:

Lo! of hundreds who aspire  
Eighties perish—nineties tire!  
They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,  
Were season'd by celestial hail of thwacks.

Fortune in this mortal race  
Builds on thwackings for its base;  
Thus the All-Wise doth make a flail a staff,  
And separates his heavenly corn from chaff.[8]

Reward may follow on such absolute obedience (*quatrain* 40). We remember what is said by Fra Giovanni in the prison of Viterbo[9]: “Endurez, souffrez, acceptez, veuillez ce que Dieu veut, et votre volonte sera faite sur la terre comme au ciel.” And perhaps the dawn for you may be your camel’s dawn (*quatrain* 41); it was usual for Arabs on the point of death to say to their sons: “Bury my steed with me, so that when I rise from the grave I will not have to go on foot.” The camel was tied with its head towards its hind legs, a saddle-cloth was wrapped about its neck, and it was left beside the grave until it died. Meanwhile, if the master is a true believer, says Mahomet, his soul has been divided from the body by Azrael, the angel of death. Afterwards the body is commanded to sit upright in the grave, there to be examined by the two black angels, Monkhar and Nakyr (*quatrain* 42), with regard to his faith, the unity of God and the mission of Mahomet. If the answers be correct, the body stays in peace and is refreshed by the air of paradise;



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if incorrect, these angels beat the corpse upon his temples with iron maces, until he roars out for anguish so loudly that he is heard by all from east to west, except by men and jinn. Abu'l-Ala had little confidence in these two angels; he reminds one of St. Catherine of Sienna, a visionary with uncommon sense, who at the age of eight ran off one afternoon to be a hermit. She was careful to provide herself with bread and water, fearing that the angels would forget to bring her food, and at nightfall she ran home again because she was afraid her parents would be anxious. With regard to the angel of death, Avicenna has related that the soul, like a bird, escapes with much trouble from the snares of earth (*quatrain* 43), until this angel delivers it from the last of its fetters. We think of the goddess Ran with her net. Death is imagined (*quatrain* 44) as a fowler or fisher of men, thus: "Do kam der Tot als ein diep, und stal dem reinen wibe daz leben uz ir libe." [10]

On account of its brilliance a weapon's edge (*quatrain* 46) has been compared in Arab poetry with sunlit glass, with the torch of a monk, with the stars and with the flame in a dark night. Nor would an Arab turn to picturesque comparisons in poetry alone. Speaking of a certain letter, Abu'l-Ala assures the man who wrote it that "it proceeds from the residence of the great doctor who holds the reins of prose and verse" (*quatrain* 50). Now with regard to glass, it was a very ancient industry among the Arabs. In the second century of the Hegira it was so far advanced that they could make enamelled glass and unite in one glass different colours. A certain skilled chemist of the period was not only expert in these processes (*quatrain* 52), but even tried to make of glass false pearls, whereon he published a pamphlet.

Death, from being a silent messenger who punctually fulfilled his duty, became a grasping, greedy foe (*quatrain* 56). In the Psalms (xci. 3-6) he comes as a hunter with snares and arrows. Also "der Tot wil mit mir ringen." [11] In ancient times Death was not a being that slew, but simply one that fetched away to the underworld, a messenger. So was the soul of the beggar fetched away by angels and carried into Abraham's bosom. An older view was the death-goddess, who receives the dead men in her house and does not fetch them. They are left alone to begin the long and gloomy journey, provided with various things. [12] "Chacun remonte a son tour le calvaire des siecles. Chacun retrouve les peines, chacun retrouve l'espoir desespere et la folie des siecles. Chacun remet ses pas dans les pas de ceux qui furent, de ceux qui lutterent avant lui contre la mort, nierant la mort,—sont morts" [13] (*quatrain* 57). It is the same for men and trees (*quatrain* 59). This vision of Abu'l-Ala's is to be compared with Milton's "men as trees walking," a kind of second sight, a blind man's pageant. In reference to haughty folk, an Arab proverb says



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that “There is not a poplar which has reached its Lord.” But on the other hand, “There are some virtues which dig their own graves,”[14] and with regard to excessive polishing of swords (*quatrain* 60) we have the story of the poet Abu Tammam, related by Ibn Khallikan. He tells us how the poet once recited verses in the presence of some people, and how one of them was a philosopher who said, “This man will not live long, for I have seen in him a sharpness of wit and penetration and intelligence. From this I know that the mind will consume the body, even as a sword of Indian steel eats through its scabbard.” Still, in Arabia, where swords were so generally used that a priest would strap one to his belt before he went into the pulpit, there was no unanimous opinion as to the polishing,—which, by the way, was done with wood. A poet boasted that his sword was often or was rarely polished, according as he wished to emphasise the large amount of work accomplished or the excellence of the polishing. Imru’al-Kais says that his sword does not recall the day when it was polished. Another poet says his sword is polished every day and “with a fresh tooth bites off the people’s heads.”[15] This vigour of expression was not only used for concrete subjects. There exists a poem, dating from a little time before Mahomet, which says that *cares* (*quatrain* 62) are like the camels, roaming in the daytime on the distant pastures and at night returning to the camp. They would collect as warriors round the flag. It was the custom for each family to have a flag (*quatrain* 65), a cloth fastened to a lance, round which it gathered. Mahomet’s big standard was called the Eagle,—and, by the bye, his seven swords had names, such as “possessor of the spine.”

With *quatrain* 68 we may compare the verses of a Christian poet, quoted by Tabari:

And where is now the lord of Hadr, he that built it and laid  
taxes on the land of Tigris?  
A house of marble he established, whereof the covering was  
made of plaster; in the galbes were nests of birds.  
He feared no sorry fate. See, the dominion of him has departed.  
Loneliness is on his threshold.

“Consider how you treat the poor,” said Dshafer ben Mahomet, who pilgrimaged from Mecca to Baghdad between fifty and sixty times; “they are the treasures of this world, the keys of the other.” Take care lest it befall you as the prince (*quatrain* 69) within whose palace now the wind is reigning. “If a prince would be successful,” says Machiavelli, “it is requisite that he should have a spirit capable of turns and variations, in accordance with the variations of the wind.” Says an Arab mystic, “The sighing of a poor man for that which he can never reach has more of value than the praying of a rich man through a thousand years.” And in connection with this quatrain we may quote Blunt’s rendering of Zohair:



I have learned that he who giveth nothing, deaf to his  
friends' begging,  
loosed shall be to the world's tooth-strokes: fools'  
feet shall tread on him.



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As for the power of the weak, we have some instances from Abbaside history. One of the caliphs wanted to do deeds of violence in Baghdad. Scornfully he asked of his opponents if they could prevent him. "Yes," they answered, "we will fight you with the arrows of the night." And he desisted from his plans. Prayers, complaints, and execrations which the guiltless, fighting his oppressor, sends up to heaven are called the arrows of the night and are, the Arabs tell us, invariably successful. This belief may solace you for the foundation of suffering (*quatrain 71*), which, by the way, is also in the philosophic system of Zeno the Stoic. Taking the four elements of Empedocles, he says that three of them are passive, or suffering, elements while only fire is active, and that not wholly. It was Zeno's opinion that everything must be active or must suffer. . . . An explanation for our suffering is given by Soame Jenyns, who flourished in the days when, as his editor could write, referring to his father Sir Roger Jenyns, "the order of knighthood was received by gentlemen with the profoundest gratitude." Soame's thesis is his "Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil," that human sufferings are compensated by the enjoyment possibly experienced by some higher order of beings which inflict them, is ridiculed by Samuel Johnson. We have Jenyns's assurance that

To all inferior animals 'tis given  
To enjoy the state allotted them by Heav'n.

And (*quatrain 75*) we may profitably turn to Coleridge:

Oh, what a wonder seems the fear of death!  
Seeing how gladly we all sink to sleep;  
Babes, children, youths and men,  
Night following night, for threescore years and ten.

We should be reconciled, says Abu'l-Ala (*quatrain 76*), even to the Christian kings of Ghassan, in the Hauran. These were the hereditary enemies of the kings of Hira. On behalf of the Greek emperors of Constantinople they controlled the Syrian Arabs. But they disappeared before the triumphant Moslems, the last of their kings being Jabalah II., who was dethroned in the year 637. His capital was Bosra, on the road between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. Nowadays the district is chiefly occupied by nomads; to the Hebrews it was known as Bashan, famous for its flocks and oak plantations. We can still discern the traces of troglodyte dwellings of this epoch. The afore-mentioned Jabalah was a convert to Islam, but, being insulted by a Mahometan, he returned to Christianity and betook himself to Constantinople, where he died. But in the time of Abu'l-Ala, the Ghassanites were again in the exercise of authority. "These were the kings of Ghassan," says Abu'l-Ala, "who followed the course of the dead; each of them is now but a tale that is told, and God knows who is good." A poet is a liar, say the Arabs, and the greatest poet is the greatest liar. But in this case Abu'l-Ala in prose was not so truthful as in poetry; for if Jabalah's house had vanished, the Ghassanites were still a power. The poet, for our consolation, has a simile (*quatrain 77*) that may be put against a passage of Homer:



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As with autumnal harvests cover'd o'er,  
And thick bestrown, lies Ceres' sacred floor,  
When round and round, with never-weary'd pain  
The trampling steers beat out th' unnumber'd grain:  
So the fierce coursers, as the chariot rolls,  
Tread down whole ranks, and crush out heroes' souls.[16]

For everything there is decay, and (*quatrain 78*) for the striped garment of a long cut which now we are unable to identify.

We read in the Wisdom of Solomon: "As when an arrow is shot at a mark, it parteth the air which immediately cometh together again, so that a man cannot know where it went through." In this place (*quatrain 84*), if the weapon's road of air is not in vain it will discover justice in the sky. How much the Arabs were averse from frigid justice is to be observed in the matter of recompense for slaying. There existed a regular tariff—so many camels or dates—but they looked askance upon the person who was willing to accept this and forgo his vengeance. If a man was anxious to accept a gift as satisfaction and at the same time to escape reproach, he shot an arrow into the air. Should it come down unspotted, he was able to accept the gift; if it was bloody, then he was obliged to seek for blood. The Arabs, by the way, had been addicted to an ancient game, but Islam tried to stamp this out, like other joys of life. The players had ten arrows, which they shot into the air; seven of them bestowed a right to the portion of a camel, the other three did not. Abu'l-Ala was fond of using arrows metaphorically. "And if one child," he writes to a distinguished sheikh, "were to ask another in the dead of night in a discussion: 'Who is rewarded for staying at home many times what he would be rewarded for going on either pilgrimage?' and the second lad answered: 'Mahomet, son of Sa'id,' his arrow would have fallen near the mark; for your protection of your subjects (*quatrain 86*) is a greater duty than either pilgrimage." And our poet calls to mind some benefits attached to slavery (*quatrain 88*): for an offence against morals a slave could receive fifty blows, whereas the punishment of a freeman was double. A married person who did not discharge his vows was liable to be stoned to death, whereas a slave in similar circumstances was merely struck a certain number of blows. It was and still is customary, says von Kremer, if anything is broken by a slave, forthwith to curse Satan, who is supposed to concern himself in very trifling matters. The sympathy Abu'l-Ala displays for men of small possessions may be put beside the modicum (*quatrain 92*) he wanted for himself. And these necessities of Abu'l-Ala, the ascetic, must appeal to us as more sincerely felt than those of Ibn at-Ta'awizi, who was of opinion that when seven things are collected together in the drinking-room it is not reasonable to stay away. The list is as follows: a melon, honey, roast meat, a young girl, wax lights, a singer,



## Page 11

and wine. But Ibn at-Ta'awizi was a literary person, and in Arabic the names of all these objects begin with the same letter. Abu'l-Ala was more inclined to celebrate the wilderness. He has portrayed (*quatrain* 93) a journey in the desert where a caravan, in order to secure itself against surprises, is accustomed to send on a spy, who scours the country from the summit of a hill or rock. Should he perceive a sign of danger, he will wave his hand in warning. From Lebid's picture of another journey—which the pre-Islamic poet undertook to the coast lands of Hajar on the Persian Gulf—we learn that when they entered a village he and his party were greeted by the crowing of cocks and the shaking of wooden rattles (*quatrain* 95), which in the Eastern Christian Churches are substituted for bells. . . . And the mediaeval leper, in his grey gown, was obliged to hold a similar object, waving it about and crying as he went: "Unclean! unclean!"

An ambitious man desired, regardless of expense, to hand down his name to posterity (*quatrain* 99). "Write your name in a prayer," said Epictetus, "and it will remain after you." "But I would have a crown of gold," was the reply. "If you have quite made up your mind to have a crown," said Epictetus, "take a crown of roses, for it is more beautiful." In the words of Heredia:

Deja le Temps brandit l'arme fatale. As-tu  
L'espoir d'éterniser le bruit de ta vertu?  
Un vil lierre suffit a disjoindre un trophée;

Et seul, aux blocs épars des marbres triomphaux  
Ou ta gloire en ruine est par l'herbe étouffée,  
Quelque faucheur Samnite ébrechera sa faux.

Would we write our names so that they endure for ever? There was in certain Arab circles a heresy which held that the letters of the alphabet (*quatrain* 101) are metamorphoses of men. And Magaira, who founded a sect, maintained that the letters of the alphabet are like limbs of God. According to him, when God wished to create the world, He wrote with His own hands the deeds of men, both the good and the bad; but, at sight of the sins which men were going to commit, He entered into such a fury that He sweated, and from His sweat two seas were formed, the one of salt water and the other of sweet water. From the first one the infidels were formed, and from the second the Shi'ites. But to this view of the everlasting question you may possibly prefer what is advanced (*quatrains* 103-7) and paraphrased as an episode: Whatever be the wisdom of the worms, we bow before the silence of the rose. As for Abu'l-Ala, we leave him now prostrated (*quatrain* 108) before the silence of the rolling world. It is a splendour that was seen by Alfred de Vigny:

Je roule avec dédain, sans voir et sans entendre,  
A côté des fourmis les populations;



Je ne distingue pas leur terrier de leur cendre.  
J'ignore en les portant les noms des nations.  
On me dit une mere et je suis une tombe.  
Mon hiver prend vos morts comme son hecatombe,  
Mon printemps n'entend pas vos adorations.



## Page 12

Avant vous j'étais belle et toujours parfumée,  
J'abandonnais au vent mes cheveux tout entiers. . . .

### Footnotes

[1] Cf. Lyall, *Ancient Arabian Poets*.

[2] Cf. Whittaker, *The Neo-Platonists*.

[3] Of course I use Professor Margoliouth's superb edition of the letters.

[4] Cf. Thielmann, *Streifzüge im Kaukasus, etc.*

[5] Cf. Ambros, *Geschichte der Musik*, 1862.

[6] Cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, vii. 174.

[7] Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, vol. i., p. 254.

[8] Meredith, *The Shaving of Shagpat*.

[9] Anatole France, *Le Puits de Sainte Claire*.

[10] Quoted by Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. 2, p. 845.

[11] Stoufenb., 1126.

[12] Cf. in Scandinavia the death-goddess Hel.

[13] Romain Rolland, *Jean Christophe*.

[14] Ella d'Arcy, *Modern Instances*.

[15] Dr. Friedrich Wilhelm Schwarzlose, *Die Waffen der alten Araber, aus ihren Dichtern dargestellt*.

[16] Pope, *Iliad*, xx. 577.



## THE DIWAN OF ABU'L-ALA

### I

Abandon worship in the mosque and shrink  
From idle prayer, from sacrificial sheep,  
For Destiny will bring the bowl of sleep  
Or bowl of tribulation—you shall drink.

### II

The scarlet eyes of Morning are pursued  
By Night, who growls along the narrow lane;  
But as they crash upon our world the twain  
Devour us and are strengthened for the feud.

### III

Vain are your dreams of marvellous emprise,  
Vainly you sail among uncharted spaces,  
Vainly seek harbour in this world of faces  
If it has been determined otherwise.

### IV

Behold, my friends, there is reserved for me  
The splendour of our traffic with the sky:  
You pay your court to Saturn, whereas I  
Am slain by One far mightier than he.

### V

You that must travel with a weary load  
Along this darkling, labyrinthine street—  
Have men with torches at your head and feet  
If you would pass the dangers of the road.

### VI

So shall you find all armour incomplete  
And open to the whips of circumstance,



That so shall you be girdled of mischance  
Till you be folded in the winding-sheet.

## VII

Have conversation with the wind that goes  
Bearing a pack of loveliness and pain:  
The golden exultation of the grain  
And the last, sacred whisper of the rose



## Page 13

### VIII

But if in some enchanted garden bloom  
The rose imperial that will not fade,  
Ah! shall I go with desecrating spade  
And underneath her glories build a tomb?

### IX

Shall I that am as dust upon the plain  
Think with unloosened hurricanes to fight?  
Or shall I that was ravished from the night  
Fall on the bosom of the night again?

### X

Endure! and if you rashly would unfold  
That manuscript whereon our lives are traced,  
Recall the stream which carols thro' the waste  
And in the dark is rich with alien gold.

### XI

Myself did linger by the ragged beach,  
Whereat wave after wave did rise and curl;  
And as they fell, they fell—I saw them hurl  
A message far more eloquent than speech:

### XII

*We that with song our pilgrimage beguile,  
With purple islands which a sunset bore,  
We, sunk upon the sacrilegious shore,  
May parley with oblivion awhile.*

### XIII

I would not have you keep nor idly flaunt  
What may be gathered from the gracious land,



But I would have you sow with sleepless hand  
The virtues that will balance your account.

## XIV

The days are dressing all of us in white,  
For him who will suspend us in a row.  
But for the sun there is no death. I know  
The centuries are morsels of the night.

## XV

A deed magnanimous, a noble thought  
Are as the music singing thro' the years  
When surly Time the tyrant domineers  
Against the lute whereoutof it was wrought.

## XVI

Now to the Master of the World resign  
Whatever touches you, what is prepared,  
For many sons of wisdom are ensnared  
And many fools in happiness recline.

## XVII

Long have I tarried where the waters roll  
From undeciphered caverns of the main,  
And I have searched, and I have searched in vain,  
Where I could drown the sorrows of my soul.

## XVIII

If I have harboured love within my breast,  
'Twas for my comrades of the dusty day,  
Who with me watched the loitering stars at play,  
Who bore the burden of the same unrest.

## XIX

For once the witcheries a maiden flung—  
Then afterwards I knew she was the bride



Of Death; and as he came, so tender-eyed,  
I—I rebuked him roundly, being young.



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### XX

Yet if all things that vanish in their noon  
Are but the part of some eternal scheme,  
Of what the nightingale may chance to dream  
Or what the lotus murmurs to the moon!

### XXI

Have I not heard sagacious ones repeat  
An irresistibly grim argument:  
That we for all our blustering content  
Are as the silent shadows at our feet.

### XXII

Aye, when the torch is low and we prepare  
Beyond the notes of revelry to pass—  
Old Silence will keep watch upon the grass,  
The solemn shadows will assemble there.

### XXIII

No Sultan at his pleasure shall erect  
A dwelling less obedient to decay  
Than I, whom all the mysteries obey,  
Build with the twilight for an architect.

### XXIV

Dark leans to dark! the passions of a man  
Are twined about all transitory things,  
For verily the child of wisdom clings  
More unto dreamland than Arabistan.

### XXV

Death leans to death! nor shall your vigilance  
Prevent him from whate'er he would possess,



Nor, brother, shall unfilial peevishness  
Prevent you from the grand inheritance.

## XXVI

Farewell, my soul!—bird in the narrow jail  
Who cannot sing. The door is opened! Fly!  
Ah, soon you stop, and looking down you cry  
The saddest song of all, poor nightingale.

## XXVII

Our fortune is like mariners to float  
Amid the perils of dim waterways;  
Shall then our seamanship have aught of praise  
If the great anchor drags behind the boat?

## XXVIII

Ah! let the burial of yesterday,  
Of yesterday be ruthlessly decreed,  
And, if you will, refuse the mourner's reed,  
And, if you will, plant cypress in the way.

## XXIX

As little shall it serve you in the fight  
If you remonstrate with the storming seas,  
As if you querulously sigh to these  
Of some imagined haven of delight.

## XXX

Steed of my soul! when you and I were young  
We lived to cleave as arrows thro' the night,—  
Now there is ta'en from me the last of light,  
And wheresoe'er I gaze a veil is hung.

## XXXI

No longer as a wreck shall I be hurled  
Where beacons lure the fascinated helm,

For I have been admitted to the realm  
Of darkness that encompasses the world.



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### XXXII

Man has been thought superior to the swarm  
Of ruminating cows, of witless foals  
Who, crouching when the voice of thunder rolls,  
Are banqueted upon a thunderstorm.

### XXXIII

But shall the fearing eyes of humankind  
Have peeped beyond the curtain and excel  
The boldness of a wondering gazelle  
Or of a bird imprisoned in the wind?

### XXXIV

Ah! never may we hope to win release  
Before we that unripeness overthrow,—  
So must the corn in agitation grow  
Before the sickle sings the songs of peace.

### XXXV

Lo! there are many ways and many traps  
And many guides, and which of them is lord?  
For verily Mahomet has the sword,  
And he may have the truth—perhaps! *perhaps!*

### XXXVI

Now this religion happens to prevail  
Until by that religion overthrown,—  
Because men dare not live with men alone,  
But always with another fairy-tale.

### XXXVII

Religion is a charming girl, I say;  
But over this poor threshold will not pass,



For I may not unveil her, and alas!  
The bridal gift I can't afford to pay.

### XXXVIII

I have imagined that our welfare is  
Required to rise triumphant from defeat;  
And so the musk, which as the more you beat,  
Gives ever more delightful fragrances.

### XXXIX

For as a gate of sorrow-land unbars  
The region of unfaltering delight,  
So may you gather from the fields of night  
That harvest of diviner thought, the stars.

### XL

Send into banishment whatever blows  
Across the waves of your tempestuous heart;  
Let every wish save Allah's wish depart,  
And you will have ineffable repose.

### XLI

My faith it is that all the wanton pack  
Of living shall be—hush, poor heart!—withdrawn,  
As even to the camel comes a dawn  
Without a burden for his wounded back.

### XLII

If there should be some truth in what they teach  
Of unrelenting Monkar and Nakyr,  
Before whose throne all buried men appear—  
Then give me to the vultures, I beseech.

### XLIII

Some yellow sand all hunger shall assuage  
And for my thirst no cloud have need to roll,

And ah! the drooping bird which is my soul  
No longer shall be prisoned in the cage.



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### XLIV

Life is a flame that flickers in the wind,  
A bird that crouches in the fowler's net—  
Nor may between her flutterings forget  
That hour the dreams of youth were unconfined.

### XLV

There was a time when I was fain to guess  
The riddles of our life, when I would soar  
Against the cruel secrets of the door,  
So that I fell to deeper loneliness.

### XLVI

One is behind the draperies of life,  
One who will tear these tanglements away—  
No dark assassin, for the dawn of day  
Leaps out, as leapeth laughter, from the knife.

### XLVII

If you will do some deed before you die,  
Remember not this caravan of death,  
But have belief that every little breath  
Will stay with you for an eternity.

### XLVIII

Astrologers!—give ear to what they say!  
“The stars be words; they float on heaven's breath  
And faithfully reveal the days of death,  
And surely will reveal that longer day.”

### XLIX

I shook the trees of knowledge. Ah! the fruit  
Was fair upon the bleakness of the soil.



I filled a hundred vessels with my spoil,  
And then I rested from the grand pursuit.

## L

Alas! I took me servants: I was proud  
Of prose and of the neat, the cunning rhyme,  
But all their inclination was the crime  
Of scattering my treasure to the crowd.

## LI

And yet—and yet this very seed I throw  
May rise aloft, a brother of the bird,  
Uncaring if his melodies are heard—  
Or shall I not hear anything below?

## LII

The glazier out of sounding Erzerum,  
Frequented us and softly would conspire  
Upon our broken glass with blue-red fire,  
As one might lift a pale thing from the tomb.

## LIII

He was the glazier out of Erzerum,  
Whose wizardry would make the children cry—  
There will be no such wizardry when I  
Am broken by the chariot-wheels of Doom.

## LIV

The chariot-wheels of Doom! Now, hear them roll  
Across the desert and the noisy mart,  
Across the silent places of your heart—  
Smile on the driver you will not cajole.

## LV

I never look upon the placid plain  
But I must think of those who lived before

And gave their quantities of sweat and gore,  
And went and will not travel back again.



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### LVI

Aye! verily, the fields of blandishment  
Where shepherds meditate among their cattle,  
Those are the direst of the fields of battle,  
For in the victor's train there is no tent.

### LVII

Where are the doctors who were nobly fired  
And loved their toil because we ventured not,  
Who spent their lives in searching for the spot  
To which the generations have retired?

### LVIII

"Great is your soul,"—these are the words they preach,—  
"It passes from your framework to the frame  
Of others, and upon this road of shame  
Turns purer and more pure."—Oh, let them teach!

### LIX

I look on men as I would look on trees,  
That may be writing in the purple dome  
Romantic lines of black, and are at home  
Where lie the little garden hostelries.

### LX

Live well! Be wary of this life, I say;  
Do not o'erload yourself with righteousness.  
Behold! the sword we polish in excess,  
We gradually polish it away.

### LXI

God who created metal is the same  
Who will devour it. As the warriors ride



With iron horses and with iron pride—  
Come, let us laugh into the merry flame.

## LXII

But for the grandest flame our God prepares  
The breast of man, which is the grandest urn;  
Yet is that flame so powerless to burn  
Those butterflies, the swarm of little cares.

## LXIII

And if you find a solitary sage  
Who teaches what is truth—ah, then you find  
The lord of men, the guardian of the wind,  
The victor of all armies and of age.

## LXIV

See that procession passing down the street,  
The black and white procession of the days—  
Far better dance along and bawl your praise  
Than if you follow with unwilling feet.

## LXV

But in the noisy ranks you will forget  
What is the flag. Oh, comrade, fall aside  
And think a little moment of the pride  
Of yonder sun, think of the twilight's net.

## LXVI

The songs we fashion from our new delight  
Are echoes. When the first of men sang out,  
He shuddered, hearing not alone the shout  
Of hills but of the peoples in the night.

## LXVII

And all the marvels that our eyes behold  
Are pictures. There has happened some event



For each of them, and this they represent—  
Our lives are like a tale that has been told.



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### LXVIII

There is a palace, and the ruined wall  
Divides the sand, a very home of tears,  
And where love whispered of a thousand years  
The silken-footed caterpillars crawl.

### LXIX

And where the Prince commanded, now the shriek  
Of wind is flying through the court of state:  
“Here,” it proclaims, “there dwelt a potentate  
Who could not hear the sobbing of the weak.”

### LXX

Beneath our palaces the corner-stone  
Is quaking. What of noble we possess,  
In love or courage or in tenderness,  
Can rise from our infirmities alone.

### LXXI

We suffer—that we know, and that is all  
Our knowledge. If we recklessly should strain  
To sweep aside the solid rocks of pain,  
Then would the domes of love and courage fall.

### LXXII

But there is one who trembles at the touch  
Of sorrow less than all of you, for he  
Has got the care of no big treasury,  
And with regard to wits not overmuch.

### LXXIII

I think our world is not a place of rest,  
But where a man may take his little ease,



Until the landlord whom he never sees  
Gives that apartment to another guest.

## LXXIV

Say that you come to life as 'twere a feast,  
Prepared to pay whatever is the bill  
Of death or tears or—surely, friend, you will  
Not shrink at death, which is among the least?

## LXXV

Rise up against your troubles, cast away  
What is too great for mortal man to bear.  
But seize no foolish arms against the share  
Which you the piteous mortal have to pay.

## LXXVI

Be gracious to the King. You cannot feign  
That nobody was tyrant, that the sword  
Of justice always gave the just award  
Before these Ghassanites began to reign.

## LXXVII

You cultivate the ranks of golden grain,  
He cultivates the cavaliers. They go  
With him careering on some other foe,  
And your battalions will be staunch again.

## LXXVIII

The good law and the bad law disappear  
Below the flood of custom, or they float  
And, like the wonderful Sar'aby coat,  
They captivate us for a little year.

## LXXIX

God pities him who pities. Ah, pursue  
No longer now the children of the wood;

Or have you not, poor huntsman, understood  
That somebody is overtaking you?



## Page 19

### LXXX

God is above. We never shall attain  
Our liberty from hands that overshroud;  
Or can we shake aside this heavy cloud  
More than a slave can shake aside the chain?

### LXXXI

“There is no God save Allah!”—that is true,  
Nor is there any prophet save the mind  
Of man who wanders through the dark to find  
The Paradise that is in me and you.

### LXXXII

The rolling, ever-rolling years of time  
Are as a diwan of Arabian song;  
The poet, headstrong and supremely strong,  
Refuses to repeat a single rhyme.

### LXXXIII

An archer took an arrow in his hand;  
So fair he sent it singing to the sky  
That he brought justice down from—ah, so high!  
He was an archer in the morning land.

### LXXXIV

The man who shot his arrow from the west  
Made empty roads of air; yet have I thought  
Our life was happier until we brought  
This cold one of the skies to rule the nest.

### LXXXV

Run! follow, follow happiness, the maid  
Whose laughter is the laughing waterfall;



Run! call to her—but if no maiden call,  
'Tis something to have loved the flying shade.

## LXXXVI

You strut in piety the while you take  
That pilgrimage to Mecca. Now beware,  
For starving relatives befoul the air,  
And curse, O fool, the threshold you forsake.

## LXXXVII

How man is made! He staggers at the voice,  
The little voice that leads you to the land  
Of virtue; but, on hearing the command  
To lead a giant army, will rejoice.

## LXXXVIII

Behold the cup whereon your slave has trod;  
That is what every cup is falling to.  
Your slave—remember that he lives by you,  
While in the form of him we bow to God.

## LXXXIX

The lowliest of the people is the lord  
Who knows not where each day to make his bed,  
Whose crown is kept upon the royal head  
By that poor naked minister, the sword.

## XC

Which is the tyrant? say you. Well, 'tis he  
That has the vine-leaf strewn among his hair  
And will deliver countries to the care  
Of courtesans—but I am vague, you see.

## XCI

The dwellers of the city will oppress  
Your days: the lion, a fight-thirsty fool,

The fox who wears the robe of men that rule—  
So run with me towards the wilderness.



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### XCII

Our wilderness will be the laughing land,  
Where nuts are hung for us, where nodding peas  
Are wild enough to press about our knees,  
And water fills the hollow of our hand.

### XCIII

My village is the loneliness, and I  
Am as the travellers through the Syrian sand,  
That for a moment see the warning hand  
Of one who breasted up the rock, their spy.

### XCIV

Where is the valiance of the folk who sing  
These valiant stories of the world to come?  
Which they describe, forsooth! as if it swum  
In air and anchored with a yard of string.

### XCV

Two merchantmen decided they would battle,  
To prove at last who sold the finest wares;  
And while Mahomet shrieked his call to prayers,  
The true Messiah waved his wooden rattle.

### XCVI

Perchance the world is nothing, is a dream,  
And every noise the dreamland people say  
We sedulously note, and we and they  
May be the shadows flung by what we seem.

### XCVII

Zohair the poet sang of loveliness  
Which is the flight of things. Oh, meditate



Upon the sorrows of our earthly state,  
For what is lovely we may not possess.

### **XCVIII**

Heigho! the splendid air is full of wings,  
And they will take us to the—friend, be wise  
For if you navigate among the skies  
You too may reach the subterranean kings.

### **XCIX**

Now fear the rose! You travel to the gloom  
Of which the roses sing and sing so fair,  
And, but for them, you'd have a certain share  
In life: your name be read upon the tomb.

### **C**

There is a tower of silence, and the bell  
Moves up—another man is made to be.  
For certain years they move in company,  
But you, when fails your song do fail as well.

### **CI**

No sword will summon Death, and he will stay  
For neither helm nor shield his falling rod.  
We are the crooked alphabet of God,  
And He will read us ere he wipes away.

### **CII**

How strange that we, perambulating dust,  
Should be the vessels of eternal fire,  
That such unfading passion of desire  
Should be within our fading bodies thrust.

### **CIII**

*Deep in a silent chamber of the rose There was a fattened worm. He looked around,  
Espied a relative and spoke at him: It seems to me this world is very good.*



## Page 21

### CIV

*A most unlovely world, said brother worm, For all of us are piteous prisoners. And if, declared the first, your thought is true, And this a prison be, melikes it well.*

### CV

*So well that I shall weave a song of praise And thankfulness because the world was wrought For us and with such providential care— My brother, I will shame you into singing.*

### CVI

*Then, cried the second, I shall raise a voice And see what poor apologies are made. And so they sang, these two, for many days, And while they sang the rose was beautiful.*

### CVII

*But this affected not the songful ones, And evermore in beauty lived the rose. And when the worms were old and wiser too, They fell to silence and humility.*

### CVIII

A night of silence! 'Twas the swinging sea  
And this our world of darkness. And the twain  
Rolled on below the stars; they flung a chain  
Around the silences which are in me.

### CIX

The shadows come, and they will come to bless  
Their brother and his dwelling and his fame,  
When I shall soil no more with any blame  
Or any praise the silence I possess.

## APPENDIX

### ON THE NAME ABU'L-ALA



Arab names have always been a stumbling-block, and centuries ago there was a treatise written which was called "The Tearing of the Veil from before Names and Patronymics." Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Jarit al-Misri is a fair example of the nomenclature; here we have the patronymic (Abu Bakr—father of Bakr), the personal name (Ahmad), the surname (ibn Jarit—son of Jarit), and the ethnic name (al-Misri—native of Egypt). In addition, they made use of fancy names if they were poets (such as Ssorrdorr, the sack of pearls, who died in the year 1072), names connoting kindred, habitation (such as Ahmad al-Maidani, the great collector of proverbs, who lived near the Maidan, the race-course of Naisapur), faith or trade or personal defects (such as a caliph who was called the father of flies, since on account of his offensive breath no fly would rest upon his lip), and finally they gave each other names of honour (such as sword of the empire, helper of the empire, *etc.*). Then the caliph gave, as a distinction, double titles and, when these became too common, triple titles. ("In this way," says al-Biruni, "the matter is opposed to sense and clumsy to the last degree, so that a man who says the titles is fatigued when he has scarcely started and he runs the risk of being late for prayer.") . . . The patronymic was, of all of these, the most in favour. At



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first it was assumed when the eldest son was born; when Bakr came into the world his father took the name of Abu Bakr, and acquired a new importance. This was not by any means peculiar to the Arabs: "O Queen," says Das, a king of Indian folk-song, "O Queen, the name of childless has departed from me." When the Arab had no son, he used an honorific patronymic (such as Abu'l-Ala, father of excellence, or Abu'l-Feda, father of redemption). At times this manufactured patronymic was a thing of mockery, more or less gentle (such as a companion of the Prophet who was fond of cats, and was entitled "father of the cat"). The prevalence among the Arabs of the patronymic is immediately noticed, (a camel is the father of Job; a strongly built person is the father of the locust; a licentious person is the father of the night; and there are multitudes of such formations). . . . With regard to surnames, it was not the custom always for them to denote that so-and-so was the son of his father's family. "Who is your father?" says an Arab to the mule, and he replies, "The horse is my maternal uncle." So there are some people who, for shame, prefer that we should think of them as members of their mother's family. . . .

The following additional quatrains may be quoted:

Unasking have we come,—too late, too soon  
Unasking from this plot of earth are sent.  
But we, the sons of noble discontent,  
Use half our lives in asking for the moon.

("We all sorely complain," says Seneca, "of the shortness of time, and yet have much more than we know what to do with. Our lives are either spent in doing nothing at all or in doing nothing to the purpose, or in doing nothing that we ought to do. We are always complaining that our days are few, and acting as though there would be no end of them.")

So then your hand has guarded me! Be blessed,  
And, if you like such reading, read, I pray,  
Through Moses' book, or credit them who say  
That old Isaiah's hand is far the best.

Some day, some day the potter shall return  
Into the dust. O potter, will you make  
An earth which I would not refuse to take,  
Or such unpleasant earth as you would spurn?

Then out of that—men swear with godly skill—  
Perchance another potter may devise



Another pot, a piece of merchandise  
Which they can love and break, if so they will.

And from a resting-place you may be hurled  
And from a score of countries may be thrust—  
Poor brother, you the freeman of the dust,  
Like any slave are flung about the world.