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EDWARD GRANVILLE BROWNE

A MEMOIR

by

SIR E. DENISON ROSS

That one of the world's most fascinating and instructive books of travel should have been allowed to remain out of print for many years is past comprehension. Yet such has been the fate of Edward Browne's *Year Amongst the Persians*, which,

published in 1893, somehow failed to attract the attention it deserved. Having by the present re-issue obtained, as it were, a new lease of life, it will, we may hope, at last take its rightful place among the great Classics of Travel. It is, however, more than a mere record of travel, and goes far beyond the ordinary limits of such works, for apart from its lively and entrancing descriptions of Persia and its people, it is an infallible guide to modern Persian literature and thought, and as such should always find its place on the student's shelf beside the author's monumental *Literary History of Persia*.

The pleasant, if difficult, task has been imposed on me, as one who for forty years enjoyed the intimate friendship of the author, to prefix to this new issue a short biographical memoir. The life of Edward Granville Browne, outside his year in Persia, was singularly devoid of adventure, and in the events of that year his biographer can add nothing to what he has himself related so vividly in the present volume. My sole aim, therefore, is to give a picture of the manner of man he was; to convey to the reader his personality, his charm, his gifts, his prejudices and his enthusiasms without attempting a chronological survey of his life. Dates and details in no way help us to understand the mind of a scholar, in his own day the greatest exponent of Persian life and letters.

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Edward Granville Browne was born at Uley, near Dursley in Gloucestershire, on 7th February 1862. His father, Sir Benjamin C. Browne, for many years the head of R. and W. Hawthorn, Leslie and Co., engineers and shipbuilders of Newcastle-on-Tyne, came originally from Gloucestershire, and his mother was a Northumbrian. He was sent to a preparatory school, to Glenalmond and to Eton, but nowhere did his teachers discover how to make him happy, nor, apparently, how happy he might have made them. Like many another man of latent gifts, he underwent the discipline of purely wasted years undiscovering and undiscovered; but it is perhaps inevitable under any system of public schooling that the most impressionable period of a boy's life must be spent in trying to be exactly like every other boy; and woe betide the one who cannot conform! Of his happy college days, and his simultaneous study of Medicine and Oriental Languages he tells us all we need to know in the Introduction to the present volume. The turning-point in E. G. B.'s career was the Russo-Turkish war of 1877. All through his life his sympathies were unfailingly drawn towards any nation that was small and oppressed, and when he saw Turkey being crushed by the great Russian Tsar, the picture of the gallant

struggle against defeat made by the losing side and the cant of the anti-Turkish party in England made him feel he "would have died to save Turkey." It is important to remember that this deep feeling for the Turks was, in this lad of sixteen, totally unconnected with any prejudices such as would naturally have stirred in him after he had begun to study the languages and history of Islamic peoples. It was the misfortunes of a Muhammadan power that brought him to the threshold of the treasurehouse of Oriental lore, of which nature had made him one of the rightful inheritors. If he was to serve Turkey in any capacity, Turkish must be studied, and, all unknown to himself, with the first perusal of Barker's Turkish Grammar, his career as an Orientalist had begun. The youth to whom Latin and Greek

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as taught in our schools had made no appeal whatever, whose dormant genius no master had ever suspected, suddenly found his own soul, and although fortune decreed that he should devote some of his best years to the study of medicine, all his spare moments were nevertheless given to acquiring Islamic languages. In 1882 he took the Natural Sciences Tripos, and in 1884 the Indian Languages Tripos.

In 1882 he had spent the Long Vacation in Constantinople, but Persia and not Turkey was destined to be the lodestar of his life, and this was no-doubt due to the superior attractions of Persian literature, especially in the field of Sufi mysticism, which, while he was studying medicine, took a very firm hold of his imagination; and it now became his chief ambition to visit the country that had given birth to Hafiz and to tread "the pure Earth of Shiraz." When at last in 1887, thanks to his Pembroke Fellowship, he was able to undertake this journey, and entered the country of his dreams, he encountered in the Babi movement a phase of Persian life which was to occupy his devoted attention for many years to come. It was no doubt the long and often weary, but always instructive, hours he had spent with Mirza Muhammad Bakir in Limehouse, that had fitted him to grasp from the first the hair-splitting heterodoxies of this sect, which had produced so many brave martyrs, and whose sufferings made such a ready appeal to his sympathetic mind. His understanding of spoken Persian when he first came among the people was already of a standard rarely attained by Europeans after years of residence, for he was at once able to discuss metaphysics, and to grasp the full meaning of quoted verses which were new to him. Anyone who has merely read Persian poetry in texts knows that this last was no simple achievement; for although modern Persian is in many respects an easy language, especially in regard

to its accident and the regularity of its verbal forms, it happens to be in the matter of vocabulary as difficult as any other language, seeing that it has a claim on any Arabic word whatsoever,

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and the very simplicity of its grammatical terminations and Indo-Germanic construction make it elusive as a poetical medium. E. G. B.'s memory was astonishing, and he not only understood what was said to him, but usually remembered conversations verbatim. As a feat of memory alone *A Year Amongst the Persians* always struck me as unique.

It is a strange fact that a gift for languages in almost all cases is a gift for a particular group or type of languages, and it is quite conceivable that if E. G. B. had not been accidentally attracted to the languages of Islam, he would never have taken up linguistic studies at all. I do not think other tongues ever came easily to him, for although he readily learnt to read, speak and write Arabic, Persian and Turkish, he never acquired the same fluency in other languages, and obviously found French and German far less easy to speak than those infinitely more difficult idioms; but he confesses that he never derived much pleasure from Hindustani, which was one of the subjects in his *Tripas*, although it is an Islamic language. Certain people are only able to pick up quickly certain languages, but it is further a fact that they have particular gifts in respect of those languages. E. G. B. had no ear for music, and he did not pronounce imitatively even those languages he knew best. But he spoke them with the same fluency that characterised his English talk. He was not really interested in languages as such; neither Semitic nor Iranian philology made any appeal to him, although at one period he developed a keen interest in the earliest examples of modern Persian and its dialects, as witness his articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1894, 1895 and 1897.

INTELLECTUAL LIFE

I think that the intellectual life of this scholar may best be depicted by an enumeration of the special phases of enthusiasm through which he passed. They almost admit of chronological arrangement, though they do not coincide exactly with the list

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of his various writings as they appeared. Relying on personal memories and reminiscences I should set them out as follows:

(I) The Islamic languages, with special regard for Persian poetry, 1879.

(2) Persian Sufiism, especially the Masnavi of Jalalu'd-Din Rumi, 1880-1887.

(3) The Babis, his interest being first aroused by reading Count Gobineau's *Religions et Philosophies dans Asie Centrale*, a work for which he had the profoundest admiration, and secondly by meeting and receiving the confidences of many Babis in Persia (see pp. 223 sqq.) which led him to devote precious years to the study of a subject which was not perhaps wholly worthy of so much strenuous labour, especially in view of the later development of Beha'ism and the resultant obscuring of the Bab, 1890.

(4) The history of Persian literature, in which subject he laid the foundation of his later work by a careful study of the Biographical Anthologies known as *tadhkiras*, 1895.

(5) When he first set about his great work on the *Literary History of Persia* he became much engrossed by the story of the deciphering of the cuneiform Persian and of Pahlavi and by the great controversy between Sir William Jones and Anquetil du Perron, 1900.

(6) With the second volume he became especially interested in the *Shahnama* of Firdawsi, and at this time began to appreciate fully the great pioneer work of Theodor Noldeke.

(7) Volume III brought him for the first time into close touch with the history of the Mongols, and led him to suggest to the Gibb Trustees the publication of the two greatest works dealing with this subject, namely the *Jahan-gusha* of Juwayni and the *Jami'u't-t-Tawarikh* of Rashidu'd-Din. In this connection may be mentioned the deep interest he took, as early as 1880, in the *Isma'ilis of Persia* and in the literature of the Hurufis.

(8) The next phase was the deep concern he showed in the Persian revolution and the controversial and tendentious

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literature to which it gave birth, 1909-1914. From 1905, when the revolutionary movement began in Persia, E. G. B. devoted much of his time to the cause of Persia. He was instrumental in forming the Persia Committee, composed of prominent members of the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament, which from 1908 to 1912 exercised considerable influence on public opinion both in England and in Europe. In 1909 he published a *Short Account of Recent Events in Persia*, and in 1910 a *History of the Persian Revolution 1905-1909*, and in 1914, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia*, all with the object of explaining to the West that a new spirit of sound nationalism had been born in the country.

(9) With his preparations for the fourth volume he became entirely engrossed in the rise of the Safavis, especially in the founder of the dynasty and in the revival of Shi'ism, 1918-20.

(10) Arabic Medicine. In 1919 he was invited to deliver a course of four FitzPatrick lectures at the College of Physicians on Arabic Medicine, which appeared in book form in 1921. This was the first occasion he had of utilising his combined knowledge of Arabic and of Medicine on an extended scale, although his medical studies had already stood him in good stead in other of his writings, notably in connection with his translation of the *Chahar Maqala*, which has a chapter devoted to Doctors.

(11) Towards the end of his life, when he had seen the fourth volume through the press (1924), he devoted most of his time to making a catalogue of the many valuable manuscripts he had collected, especially in the last decade, by the purchase of the collections of General Houtum-Schindler and of Haji 'Abdu'l-Majid Belshah.

Apart from his purely literary activities he devoted much time to the promotion of Oriental studies in the University, and was mainly responsible for the creation of a School of Living Oriental Languages in Cambridge in connection with the Sudan Political Service and the Consular Department of the Foreign Office. Mention must also be made of his practical efforts in the

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production of reliable and inexpensive editions of Arabic and Persian texts, towards which he contributed out of his own resources.

In between these enthusiasms which occupied his hours of quiet work--and it was always a marvel how those hours were extracted from the twenty-four, seeing that he never grudged giving his best to all who came to his rooms, or later on to his house--he devoted much time to the management of the affairs of the E. J. W. Gibb Trust. Among the earliest friends with whom he was brought into contact by his Turkish studies, was E. J. W. Gibb, who devoted the whole of his life to the study of Ottoman poetry. When in 1901 Gibb died, only one volume of his monumental *History of Ottoman Poetry* had appeared, although the rest of the work was nearly complete. As a labour of love E. G. B. took upon himself the most onerous task of seeing the whole work through the press, and completing the unfinished portions; and this involved an immense amount of patient research, seeing that every quotation had to be verified, and that the Turkish originals of the many poems translated in the body of this work had to be traced to their sources, often in rare

manuscripts, and copied for the printer. It would be hard to overestimate the unselfish devotion to which this undertaking bore witness. But his tribute of esteem to the great Turkish scholar did not end here. In order to perpetuate the memory of E. J. W. Gibb, Mrs Jane Gibb, his mother, left a sum of money yielding considerable yearly interest to be controlled by a body of trustees and to be employed in the publication of texts and translations of Turkish, Persian and Arabic books, and it fell to the lot of E. G. B. to carry into effect this laudable bequest. In 1904 he established, with five other scholars and the widow of the Turkish scholar, the "E. J. W. Gibb Memorial," which has since that time published more than forty volumes of texts and translations; and it was E. G. B. who, up to the time of his death, was the moving spirit of the Trust, which has conferred on scholars

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marvellous entertainment which every kind of visitor enjoyed in these rooms, the high table at Pembroke provided in those years, especially from 1890 to 1900, some of the best talk and company to be found in Cambridge. Some names occur to one, as those of Neil, Heriz Smith, and Moriarty, to mention only those who are no longer among the living. It would be hard to imagine a more delightful evening than one which began in the Combination Room and ended at any o'clock in E. G. B.'s rooms. E. G. B.'s hospitality had one characteristic which must have struck all those who had the privilege of enjoying it, namely, that it made no distinction of persons. Just as all were welcome, so were all worth entertaining. In E. G. B.'s rooms, as afterwards in Firwood, no one was ever regarded as a sar-i-khar, or donkey's head (see this volume, p. 300). He would always give of his best and most brilliant, no matter who composed his audience; the colleague, the professor, the graduate and the freshman were all regaled with the same feast of talk; for E. G. B. was rather a talker than a conversationalist, and no one who listened to him could possibly have wished it otherwise. His fund of anecdote was inexhaustible, and yet one cannot remember ever having heard him merely help a current story on its rounds. His tales were drawn either from Oriental literature or from the adventures of himself or his friends, to which he had the gift of lending a peculiar charm which made even one's own adventures, should one happen to be the protagonist, seem new, and he would remember sayings verbatim that the speaker had forgotten as soon as uttered. And of what did he talk? And who shall attempt to describe the manner of his discourse? One can

recall a hundred topics which sometimes kept his hearers enthralled for a whole evening: such as, the visit of an Oriental; the Irish question; the iniquities of Tsarist Russia; Stephen Leacock's latest nonsense; Wilfrid Blunt; or the beauties of Oriental poetry, in describing which he would not only quote the original Arabic or Persian without hesitation, but would follow this with

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a fluent literal rendering in which not a point would be missed. He had a wonderful gift of rendering such poetry into English verse and one can only regret that he did not leave behind him more of such renderings. I am not aware that he ever attempted to write original verse, except in dedicating books to his mother or to his wife, but his translations go to show that he had in him the true poetic feeling. Excepting only his love of Persian carpets, he had no real interest in the fine arts; I do not think he cared any more for Persian miniatures, apart from their subject-matter, than he did for a language, apart from the thoughts it conveyed. I never heard him discuss either Religion or Art. He took no interest in society outside that of Cambridge; London only existed for him as containing the British Museum and a few book-shops, though he did like a good full-blooded melodrama. He cared little what he ate, and had no taste for wines; the only repast I ever knew him to enjoy was his tea at midnight which he brewed himself; he made it very strong, and generally allowed it to get cold, but its preparation on a spirit-lamp played almost the part of a religious ceremony in his life, which might never be omitted. He loved cigarettes and smoked them incessantly, but he never took either to cigars or a pipe, except the hubble-bubble on his first return from the East. He began fly-fishing rather late in life, but in the end preferred it to all other recreations in his summer holidays. While at Pembroke he rowed and had a place in his College boat; he also played tennis and squash racquets, but on the whole he was not a lover of games.

In later life he became a rich man, and was thus freed from all financial anxiety, permitted to practise his natural generosity and enabled to buy all the books he needed; and never was an assured competency better bestowed by Fortune. For his liberality knew no bounds, and the number of Orientals alone who, deserving or undeserving, were the recipients of his charity is hard to estimate. But his kindness never seemed to lie so much

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in the tangible results as in the infinite trouble he took to help all who came to him.

His married life was of the happiest, and in Alice Blackburne-

Daniell he found an utterly devoted wife, a wonderful mother of his two sons, and a help-meet fitted by intellectual gifts to appreciate his talents and to encourage him in his scholarly labours; and the hospitality of Firwood Library quickly made up for the desertion of the Pembroke rooms. Mrs Browne was indeed the ideal wife for such a man, and during their nineteen years of undisturbed happiness she devoted to him all her thoughts and all her strength. In November 1924 he was suddenly stricken with a severe heart attack, which brought his activities to an end. For eight long months every effort was made to restore his strength, but when, in June 1925, his wife, worn out with the constant anxiety, suddenly collapsed and died, there was no one who could take her place, and he never rallied from the blow. He only survived his wife's death by six months, during which time, by a tremendous effort of will, he answered in his own hand all the letters of condolence he had received, numbering over 300 in all, but his life's work was finished.

He was a most punctilious correspondent and wrote letters with the same ease in Arabic, Persian or Turkish as he did in English, and his correspondence in all these languages was voluminous. Both in English and in Arabic he had a wonderfully neat writing, and his own books and manuscripts were always annotated with the greatest care and legibility.

What has been said regarding his correspondence and his hospitality is merely an indication of his great natural generosity in the matter of time, which is the commodity which scholars are apt most to grudge. But with time he was a magician, for he always seemed to find it for his own work, no matter what the distractions of the day and night might have been. I can only say from personal experience that in the many weeks and days I have spent with him, I hardly ever remember to have caught

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him at work. Occasionally he would write a note or two in one's presence, but otherwise all his time seemed to be at the disposal of his visitors. How remarkable this is when one considers the dimensions of his literary output, including as it did much reading of Oriental proofs, an occupation demanding the utmost care, and considerable strain to the eyes on account of the diacritical points of the Arabic alphabet.

It is not my purpose here to describe his numerous works, or even to provide a list of them; for this I would refer the reader to Professor R. A. Nicholson's Introduction to the forthcoming Catalogue of E. G. B.'s manuscripts.

He was held in the deepest esteem and affection by the Persians,

and I cannot support this statement better than by quoting from an article in French which appeared in a .Teheran newspaper,

Mihan, 6th of Rajab, A.H. 1334:

"Je dois maintenant vous exposer, en grandes lignes, les services qu'il a rendus à la Perse. Ces services peuvent se diviser en deux catégories:

(1) Services rendus à la littérature persane.

(2) Services rendus à la cause nationale persane.

"Il n'y a personne dans notre histoire dont les services rendus à la littérature persane puissent être comparés à ceux de Browne exceptés ceux rendus par les grands rois tels que Mahmoud Ghaznavi le Patron de Ferdowsi et Sandjar Seldjoukide, le Protecteur de Anwari. Et tandis qu'eux travaillaient dans l'intérêt de leur propre pays Browne faisait tout pour la renaissance et la propagation d'une langue qui n'était pas la sienne.

"Passons maintenant aux services qu'il a rendus à la cause nationale persane.

"Déjà en 1887 quand Browne écrivait son ouvrage intitulé 'Un an au milieu des Persans' ou il racontait son voyage en Perse, il plaignait le peuple persan d'avoir un gouvernement corrompu à sa tête. À partir de 1906 ou la Révolution s'est déclarée en Perse, notre Regrette Ami a consacré une grande partie de son temps à défendre notre cause....

"En parlant des services que notre regrette Ami a rendus à la cause nationale persane je n'ai pas voulu parler des aides matérielles et morales qu'il a apportées aux réfugiés persans, victimes de la tyrannie étrangère, qui avaient pris le chemin de l'Europe pour échapper au sort funeste qui les attendait dans leur patrie même. Le château de Firwood près de Cambridge où vivait Browne était un asile pour tous les Persans qui se rendaient en Angleterre, et l'hospitalité qu'il réservait à nos compatriotes était sans

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limites et sans bornes. Les Persans qui s'y rendaient se croyaient chez eux, dans leur propre pays, tant par la façon dont étaient [était] aménagés le château que par l'accueil chaleureux dont ils étaient l'objet.

"Après ce court exposé vous voyez, Messieurs, quels motifs nous ont poussés à organiser cette réunion commémorative. Dans la personne de Browne nous avons perdu un grand Ami qui a consacré tout son être pour nous faire connaître au monde. Cette grande âme généreuse n'avait pas seulement de la sympathie et de l'admiration pour notre pays mais de l'amour, de l'amour pur, profond et désintéressé que l'on voit dans toutes ses œuvres et dans chacune des lignes qu'il a écrites.

"Nous avons envers lui une grande dette de gratitude qui ne pourra être acquittée que par les générations à venir. Browne vivra toujours dans nos cœurs et la Perse gardera de lui le souvenir ineffaçable, le souvenir

precieux et cher d'un grand et noble Anii qui a tout fait pour reduire ses souffrances et la faire aimer."

The tributes paid to him after his death, both in the public press and in private letters, all testify as much to his personal qualities as to his profound learning. On the Continent and in America he was regarded as the greatest authority on Persia, and he was universally recognised as one of the foremost Orientalists of his day. In 1921, on the occasion of his fifty-ninth birthday, he received a complimentary address, accompanied by beautiful presents, signed by a number of representative Persians, expressing their appreciation of the services he had rendered to their language and literature. In 1922, on his sixtieth birthday, he received, in addition to letters and addresses from Europe and Persia, a volume of Oriental studies, to which scholars of every country had contributed articles. He never sought for honours and did not care to take a Doctor's degree at Cambridge, which he could have done any time, but it is remarkable that he received so little public recognition from learned Societies abroad. From the Shah of Persia he received the order of the Lion and the Sun, he was in 1922 elected a Vice-President of the Royal Asiatic Society, in 1903 a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1911 a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. Had he wished he might have been Master of Pembroke, but he disliked administrative work and

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obeyed grudgingly the calls which various University meetings were wont to make on his time.

In reading this great book of travel, in which the discoveries are confined to the soul of the people, one cannot fail to be struck by the great toleration the author shows towards the weaknesses of the Persians. The fact that one of his hosts had become the terror of those he governed and was guilty of a thousand unjust executions and judgments, does not in any way lower E. G. B.'s admiration of his gracious manners or his fine library. He so loved his Persians that he forgave everything, and only stayed to praise and admire.

He had a certain dislike of things Indian, due perhaps to a difference between the Indian and the Persian spirit, and reinforced by a grudge which he bore Indian Muslims because they pronounced Persian unlike the Persians themselves. Another element in this was his disapproval of Anglo-Indian officials, who were his constant bugbear. His anti-Indian prejudices extended even to Indo-Persian poets, that is, the Persian poets like Amir Khusraw and Sa'ib who settled in India, although quite

late in life, while he was writing the fourth volume of his great Literary History, he was at length compelled to recognise their merits and make the amende honorable. His feelings towards Indian Muslims also underwent a complete change partly on account of the favourable impression created by some young Indian students who came to study Islamic literature under him in Cambridge during the last six years of his life, and partly owing to his great admiration for the writings of Maulavi Shibli Nu'mani of Aligarh.

That Edward Browne was a genius no man could deny, and his genius was of two distinct kinds; he not only fulfilled the condition of possessing the capacity for taking infinite pains but also had the genius which reveals itself in the inspiration of the spoken word. For it was in his talk and conversation that the scholar, the wit, the enthusiast and the man of heart were

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revealed in full bloom, beside which his writings, with all their brilliance, are but so many pressed flowers.

To write dispassionately of so dear a friend has been no easy task, but my aim was to represent this great scholar in the light of common day, so that some lasting memorial should remain of his intellectual progress and his mental outlook, of his steadfast ideals, his simplicity of character and his untiring devotion to the cause of sound scholarship.

E. DENISON ROSS

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EXORDIUM

(DEDICATED TO THE PERSIAN READER ONLY)

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Forgiving

PRAISE be to GOD, the Maker of Land and Sea, the Lord of "'BE,' and it shall be":1 Who brought me forth from the place of my birth, obedient to His saying, "Journey through the Earth":2 Who guarded me from the dangers of the way with the shield of "No fear shall be upon them and no dismay":3 Who caused me to accomplish my quest and thereafter to return and rest, after I had beheld the wonders of the East and of the West!

BUT AFTERWARDS. Thus saith the humblest and unworthiest of His servants, who least deserveth His Bounty, and most needeth His Clemency (may God forgive his failing and heal his ailing!): When from Kirman and the confines of Bam I had returned again to the city on the Cam, and ceased for a while to wander, and began to muse and ponder on the lands where I had been and the marvels I had therein seen, and how in pursuit of knowledge I had forgone the calm seclusion of college, and through days

warm and weary, and nights dark and dreary, now hungry and now athirst I had tasted of the best and of the worst, experiencing hot and cold, and holding converse with young and old, and had climbed the mountain and crossed the waste now slowly and now with haste, until I had made an end of toil, and set my foot upon my native soil; then, wishful to impart the gain which I had won with labour and harvested with pain (for "Travel is travail"⁴ say the sages), I resolved to write these pages, and, taking ink and pen, to impart to my fellow-men what I had witnessed and understood of things evil and good.

Now seeing that to fail and fall is the fate of all, and to claim exemption from the lot of humanity a proof of pride and vanity, and somewhat of mercy our common need; therefore let such as read, and errors detect, either ignore and neglect, or correct and conceal them rather than revile and reveal them. For he is lenient who is wise, and from his brother's failings averts his eyes, being loth to hurt or harm, nay, meeting bane with balm. WA'S-SALAM.

1 Kur'an, ii, III; iii, 42, etc.

2 Kur'an, vi, II; xxvii, 71, etc.

3 Kur'an, ii, 36, 59, 106, etc.

4 So Burton has well translated the Arabic proverb: "Es-seferu kit'atun mina's-sakar." ("Travel is a portion of hell-fire.")

single page

chapter 1

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