

Persian Literature



IT IS remarkable how very little is known in this country of the famous poets of Persia and their works. Mowlavi, Hafiz, Jami, and Saadi are the most distinguished of Persian poets. The name Saadi appended to his sayings and aphorisms in odd corners of periodicals is perhaps more or less familiar to the casual reader. For the benefit of the student a succinct sketch of the life of this great poet will here be given, with translations of a few of his noteworthy aphorisms and a few stories from Persian wit and humor.

Saadi was born toward the close of the twelfth century, in the beautiful city of Shiraz. He is said to have lived upward of a hundred years. For thirty years he traveled through various countries, studying the people of each, their ways and customs; the rest of his life he spent in retirement and acts of devotion. In the latter part of his life he engaged himself in writing his famous works. "Gulistan" (the Rose Garden) is the most popular of his books. Its moral truths, clothed in poetic language, have come to be common proverbs among the educated classes of Persia. The work is also used as a text book in large numbers of Persian and Turkish schools. It has been translated into English by Mr. Francis Gladwin. In order that my readers may enjoy the fragrance of "The Rose Garden" of Saadi, I will quote a few of his aphorisms.

"Two persons took trouble in vain and used fruitless endeavors—he who acquired wealth without enjoying it, and he who taught wisdom, but did not practice it."

"How much soever you may study science, if you do not act wisely you are ignorant."

"The beast whom they load with books is not profoundly learned and wise; what knoweth his empty skull whether he carrieth books or firewood?"

"Affairs are accomplished through patience; and the hasty faileth in his undertakings. I saw with mine own eyes in the desert a man who went slowly overtake him that went swiftly. The fleet steed was tired with galloping, while the camel-driver proceeded in an even, slow pace."

"A kingdom gains credit from wise men, and religion obtains perfection from the virtuous. Kings stand in more need of wise men than wise men do of appointments at court."

"Although in the estimation of the wise silence is commendable, yet at a proper season free speech is preferable."

"Two things indicate an obscure understanding: to be silent when we should converse, and to speak when we should be silent."

The sentiment so tersely expressed in the Chinese proverb, "He who never reveals a secret keeps it best," is thus finely amplified by Saadi: "The matter which you wish to preserve as a secret impart not to everyone, although he be worthy of confidence; for no one will be so true to your secret as yourself. It is safer to be silent than to reveal a secret to everyone and tell him not to mention it. O wise man! Stop the water at the spring-head, for when it is in full stream you cannot arrest it."

Another phase of Persian literature—the humorous—is exemplified in the following stories:

A certain gazi read in books that any man who has a small head and a long beard is invariably a fool. Looking at himself in the mirror, he discovered that he possessed both qualifications. He reasoned to himself thus: "My small head I can't make larger, but I can do away with most of my beard." So, holding his beard by hand, he approached a burning candle, intent upon spoiling one qualification. No sooner had the hair caught fire than he let his hand go, and both his beard and mustache were consumed. Looking at the mirror with great surprise he declared indeed that what he had read in the books was true.

A man went to a professional scribe and asked him to write a letter for him. The scribe excused himself by saying that he had a pain in his foot. "A pain in the foot!" echoed the man. "What a foolish excuse! I don't want to send you anywhere." "Very true," said the scribe, "but whenever I write a letter for anyone I am always sent for to read it, because no one else can make it out."

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