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PROVERBS

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EVERY nation has its own proverbs. Many of them are very old; and most of them are anonymous. For, while the authorship of some wise sayings that have almost become proverbs can be traced (it was, for example, Shakespeare who said, "Apparel oft proclaims the man"), we do not know who first invented the vast majority of a nation's proverbs. But we can imagine what sort of people these early proverb-makers must have been. They were wise men (and women, too), who had learnt much from their own experience and from the experience of others; close and shrewd observers of life, who watched the follies and wisdom of their neighbours, and learnt by observation the secrets of their failures and successes. Further, they had the rare gift of pithy and apt expression, and knew how to compress a world of wisdom into a brief memorable phrase. Most of their proverbs are concise expressions of worldly wisdom learnt from actual life and experience. They do not, as a rule, deal with spiritual religion or high morality, but with the conclusions of everyday com-

mon sense; the practical wisdom of men of the world. They are the plain man's shrewd comments on life and conduct as he knows them. Such a man finds, for example, that "honesty is the best policy," though that proverb does not give the high moral reason why a man should be honest.

Every nation has its own proverbs; and yet there are certain characteristics that are common to all. Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, after studying a big compendium of the world's proverbs, says that they left him with two impressions: "First, an impression that there is a strong family resemblance between men of all races and ages in spite of obvious differences; and, secondly, that when they have reflected upon their experience, on themselves and each other, whether they happen to be black and live in the forests of the Congo, or Celts who lived a thousand years ago, or Chinese mandarins, or Dutch burghers, or English peasants, or Indian sages, that they tend to give each other much the same advice. Sometimes this advice is noble, sometimes otherwise; but they seem

to notice much the same human limitations and to honour much the same qualities."

What, exactly, is a proverb? It has been concisely described as "The wisdom of many and the wit of one." A more elaborate dictionary definition is: "A brief, pithy saying, condensing in witty and striking form the wisdom of experience; an adage, apothegm, or wise saw; a familiar and widely known saying in epigrammatic form." A study of examples will show that that is a good description.

Proverbs are noted for their terseness of expression. They compress a lot of meaning into very few words. As one has well put it, they are "short sentences founded on long experience." Proverbs are bits of potted experience, or worldly wisdom in tabloid form. For example, a Russian proverb, "The burden is light on the shoulders of another," compresses into nine words what it took the French writer, La Rochefoucauld, sixteen words to say: "Nobody is so weak but he is strong enough to bear misfortunes he does not feel". The proverb, "Once bitten, twice shy," puts in four words the meaning of some such sentence as this: 'A child learns by experience; for when he has once been bitten, he will be careful in future not to meddle with strange dogs.' As examples of terseness, consider these proverbs: "Least said, soonest mended"; "All's well that ends well"; "Forewarned is forearmed"; "Look before you leap"; "A slothful man never has time"; "Beggars cannot be choosers"; "Enough is as good as a feast"; "Example is better than precept"; "Make hay while the sun shines"; "It takes two to make a quarrel"; "Every

cloud has a silver lining"; "After the storm comes the calm"; "A wise head makes a close mouth"; "A rolling stone gathers no moss"; "Half a loaf is better than no bread"; "Constant dripping wears the stone away"; "Cut your coat according to your cloth"; "Don't fall between two stools"; "Necessity is the mother of invention"; "Easy come, easy go"; "Better a living dog than a dead lion"; "He laughs best who laughs last"; "More haste less speed"; "Knowledge is power"; "Union is strength"; "Rome was not built in a day".

Being so short and striking, proverbs are easily remembered, and have come down from father to son, from one generation to another, by word of mouth. What makes some proverbs so easy to remember is the use of rhyme (or assonance) and of alliteration. In these proverbs rhyme helps; "Well begun is half done"; "No pains, no gains"; "Safe bind, safe find"; "Early sow, early mow"; "A friend in need is a friend indeed"; "Birds of a feather flock together"; "When the cat's away the mice will play"; "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" (imperfect rhyme); "A stitch in time saves nine" (assonance). Alliteration helps in these—"Waste not, want not"; "Look before you leap"; "Penny wise and pound foolish"; "All is not gold that glitters"; "Cut your coat according to your cloth"; "Where there's a will there's a way"; "Out of debt, out of danger"; "Barking dogs seldom bite"; "Delays are dangerous"; "Time and tide wait for no man"; "Slow and steady wins the race"; "It's a long lane that has no turning"; "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush"; "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Some proverbs seem to disagree; or, rather, they express opposite lessons of experience. For example, one proverb says, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks"; but another says just the opposite, "It is never too late to learn." The safe, cautious man quotes, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," but the man of an enterprising spirit says, "Nothing venture, nothing have". One who wants deeds rather than words, says, "Fine words butter no parsnips," while another, who knows the power of flattery, says, "Honey catches more flies than vinegar". In the same way, consider these pairs of proverbs:— "Many hands make light work," *but* "Too many cooks spoil the broth"; "Fine feathers make fine birds," *but* "Handsome is that handsome does"; "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," *but* "Out of sight, out of mind"; "Appearances are deceitful," *but* "Apparel oft proclaims the man"; "Marry in haste, repent at leisure," *but*, "Happy is the wooing that's not long in doing"; "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," *but* "One man's meat is another man's poison"; "Every man is the architect of his own fate," *but*, "Man proposes, but God disposes"; "Hope springs eternal in the human breast" (Pope), *but* "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick" (Bible); "Familiarity breeds contempt," *but* "To know all is to forgive all".

So far we have been dealing mainly with English proverbs; and, before we leave them, look at a few more miscellaneous examples:—"Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves"; "Never put off till tomorrow what you can

do today"; "It's no use crying over spilt milk"; "A man is known by the company he keeps"; "Don't count your chickens until they are hatched"; "Fire is a good servant but a bad master"; "It takes two to make a quarrel"; "Never look a gift horse in the mouth"; "Don't swop horses when crossing a stream"; "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"; "Prevention is better than cure"; "Experience is the best teacher"; "God sends the meat, and the devil sends the cook"; "Before marriage keep your eyes open; afterwards keep them shut"; and a line of Pope that has passed into a proverb, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing". Also, "Strike while the iron is hot"; "Still waters run deep"; "The early bird catches the worm".

Turning now to proverbs in other languages, let us first look at a few ancient Hebrew proverbs, which can be read in the English version of the Bible. In the Old Testament there is a big collection of wise sayings (many of which were attributed to King Solomon, who was famous for his wisdom) called the book of "Proverbs". These old proverbs are generally written in verse couplets, or pairs of contrasted sentences, according to the peculiar principle of Hebrew verse known as 'rhythmic parallelism'. This consists of the statement in different words of the thought of one line, or the opposite of that thought, in a corresponding line. For example, in this couplet, "Pride goeth before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before a fall,"

the second line simply repeats the thought of the first line in different words; while in this couplet,

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth,
But the righteous are as bold as a lion,"

the second line gives a contrast to the thought in the first. This construction prevents the old Hebrew proverb from being so terse as, for example, most English proverbs. At the same time, especially when they express a contrast, many of these old wise sayings are very effective. Look at a few more.

"The way of the sluggard is as a hedge of thorns,
But the path of the righteous is made a high-way."

"A soft answer turneth away wrath,
But a grievous word stirreth up anger":

"In all labour is profit,
But the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury."

"He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."

"The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast,
But the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."

"Better is a dinner of herbs where love is,
Than a stalled ox and hatred therewith."

"The sluggard saith, There is a lion in the way,

A lion is in the streets."

"Who so diggeth a pit shall fall therein,
And he that rolleth a stone, it shall return upon him."

"Boast not thyself of tomorrow,
For thou knowest not what a day will bring forth."

"The full soul loatheth the honeycomb,
But to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet."

Hebrew proverbs are often in the form of similes: for example,—

"A continual dropping on a rainy day,
And a contentious woman are alike."

"As cold waters to a thirsty soul,
So is good news from a far country."

"As the door turneth upon its hinges,
So doth a sluggard upon his bed."

"As clouds and wind without rain,
So is he that boasteth of his gifts falsely."

"As a dog that returneth to his vomit,
So is a fool that repeateth his folly."

"Fervent lips and a wicked heart,
Are like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross."

"A word fitly spoken,
Is like apples of gold in baskets of silver."

Chinese literature is full of proverbial wisdom, and Chinese proverbs are noted for their wit, grace and finish. The Chinese language also gives them a terseness of expression such as no European language can rival. So when translated into English, Chinese proverbs lose much of their characteristic brevity. Many of them have the form of the Hebrew 'parallelism,' but it is shorter and neater. For example: "When fortune smiles, who doesn't? When fortune doesn't, who does?"; "Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak." "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who find pleasure in it." But many of the Chinese proverbs are simple sentences like the English. For example "Who sits in a well to observe the sky does not see very much"; "When

men are friendly, even water is sweet;" "Don't throw your hook where there are no fish"; "If you don't scale the mountain, you can't see the plain"; "A needle is only sharp at one end"; "Marble is not less hard for being polished"; "A hen does not usually announce the break of day"; "Hats don't differ by a foot"; "Do not seek to escape from a flood by clinging to the tail of a tiger"; "One can only see one's faults with other people's eyes;" "Bow low when the eaves are low."

Coming now to your own country, let us look at a few Indian proverbs, along with some English proverbs that correspond with them. The Indian saying, "A hasty man returns twice before he reaches his destination," says the same thing as the English, "More haste, less speed." The Indian, "Stretch your feet according to your bed," gives the same advice as the English, "Cut your coat according to your cloth." The Indian, "What taste has an ass for sugar?" expresses the same as, "Cast not your pearls before swine". While in England we say, "All is not gold that glitters," in India you say "Everything that is white is not milk," "Every one who is black is not the Devil's brother-in-law." The belief that "Speech is silver and silence is golden" is expressed in the Gujarati saying, "The wise man speaks once, the fool at once." And the danger of "falling between two stools" is brought home to us by the Indian saying that "The guest of two houses will go hungry."

Here are a few Abyssinian proverbs: "O lamb, said the hyena, 'if I don't eat you,

you will eat me," which is a curious echo of Æsop's Fable about the wolf and the lamb; and it is exactly what Hitler and his Nazis are now giving as an excuse for their brutal and unprovoked attacks on small neutral states like Norway, Holland, Belgium and Denmark in the present war. The Abyssinians also say: - "The marvellous astonishes only for a week"; "Honour withdraws from those who lie"; "The death of a mother and a stone seat hurt in time."

The Tartars have two striking sayings: "At the torches foot there is darkness," and "Ask the neighbouring village what is happening in your own."

It is impossible here to give even specimens of the proverbial wisdom in all languages. Only a few more odd examples can be quoted. The Italians say: "Time is an inaudible file"; the Turks, "Death is a black camel that kneels at every man's gate"; the Spaniards, "Truth is always green." But a little more time must be given to the Arabs, who have many fine proverbs. Some recall the shifts of those who live in the desert: as, "All is soap to Bedouins." But here is a profound one, "In despair are many hopes." Is there not an ominous truth in "Cruelty is the strength of the wicked"? There are also shrewd ones in Arabic, as "The man who compels you to blame him is about to desert you"; "To ask well is to know much." And there is a poetic grasp of the human spirit in this fine saying, "Nothing but a handful of dust will fill the eye of man."

I will conclude with this fine Arabic proverb: "The dogs bark, but the caravan goes on." Can you not see the picture it calls up? The long line of stately camels marching on with silent even pace, and the village dogs barking and yelping round their feet. What a noise and hubbub! But the haughty camels march on unmoved, with their heads in the air, taking not the slightest notice of the yapping curs. It reminds one of the motto of an old Scottish

family: "They say! What say they? Let them say!" The lesson of both sayings is that, when one is quite clear in one's own mind as to the wisdom and rightness of a certain line of conduct, one must be brave enough to ignore capitious criticism and face unreasonable opposition unmoved. As Professor Jowett of Oxford used to say: "Never explain yourself; never apologise; just go on, and let them howl!"

OUR MYSTIC FRIEND

(On seeing a painting of Nicholas Roerich, "The Shadow of the Teacher.")

BY PROF. MOHANLAL KASHYAP, M.A., *Muttra*

A Weird mass of idle cliffs and sullen rocks
Laid bare to the rage of the sun and rapid
swelling streams
With dull and rugged looks, in coarse,
unshapely blocks,
All grim and grey, perhaps, forgotten,
massive dreams
Concealing Damyanti's cries and Ahalya's
gentle tears
And tender Gop's rapt in Krishna's fluted
lure;
Buddha's quiet joys denouncing petty,
human fears
These sleeping bards of glory, yet so proud
and pure.
Perhaps, the unfulfilled desires of a rustic
lad,
Uncouth and coarse, who loved a simple
gipsy-maid.
The maid who once illumed his little world
and fled
Away—dwell in these rocks that would not
die nor fade.

And who will rouse them? Who will cry
and call
These poets of passion—passion subdued in
stone,
Dark, chill and quiet, who know no rise and
fall,
Who will hear their mirth and music, their
unrecorded moan?
Amid these *persons* of the great and gloried
past
A shadow dark, unmasked, unreal is seen,
Among the rocks it stands a rock of ancient
cast,
A figure, proud and pure, a person, firm and
lean.
He lifts a finger and the rocks instantly
assume
Their human form and nod and stay at his
command;
They speak their tale, those sleeping bards
of joy and gloom!
The shadow bids, they glow and grow—our
mystic friend!