

TRANSLATIONS OF EASTERN POETRY AND PROSE

MURRA OF SHAIBÁN

SOME of the oldest Arabic poems that have come down to us are connected with the War of Basús, which broke out in the early years of the sixth century A.D. between the brother-tribes of Bakr and Taghlib. Murra belonged to Shaibán, a subdivision of Bakr. He had a son, Jassás, and a daughter, Ḥálfa, who was married to Kulaib, the chief of Taghlib. Jassás quarrelled with Kulaib and murdered him. At first, Murra was for surrendering his guilty son, but when the elders of Shaibán resolved to fight rather than give him up, Murra turned to him and said:

I

If war thou hast wrought and brought on me,
 No laggard I with arms outworn.
 Whate'er betide, I make to flow
 The baneful cups of death at morn.

When spear-heads clash, my wounded man
 Is forced to drag the spear he stained.
 Never I reckon, if war must be,
 What Destiny hath preordained.

Donning war's harness, I will strive
 To fend from me the shame that sears.
 Already I thrill and my lust is roused
 For the shock of the horsemen against the spears!

AL-FIND

WHEN war began, the other clans of Bakr held aloof, deeming Shaibán in the wrong, until an event happened which caused them to rise as one man. Bujair, the nephew of Ḥáarith ibn 'Ubád, was treacherously slain by Muhalhil, Kulaib's brother, notwithstanding that Ḥáarith and his family had hitherto taken no part in the struggle. On hearing this, Ḥáarith declared that if vengeance were satisfied by the death of Bujair, he would be content, but

2

AL-FIND

Muhalhil replied, "I have only taken satisfaction for Kulaib's shoe-latchet." Then Ḥārith sprang up in wrath, crying:

"God knows, I kindled not this fire, although
 I am burned in it to-day.
 A lord for a shoe's latchet is too dear:
 To horse! To horse! Away!"

And al-Find said on the same occasion:

2

We spared the Banú Hind¹ and said, "Our brothers they remain:

It may be Time will make of us one people yet again."
 But when the wrong grew manifest, and naked Ill stood plain,
 And naught was left but violence, we paid them bane for bane.
 As lions marched we forth to war in rage and fierce disdain,
 Our swords brought widowhood and tears and wailing in
 their train,
 Our spears dealt gashes wide whence blood like water spilled
 amain.

No way but force to weaken force and mastery obtain;
 'Tis wooing contumely to meet wild actions with humane:
 By evil thou mayst win to peace when good is tried in vain.

JAḤDAR SON OF ḌUBAI'A

At last the Bakrites prepared for a decisive battle, shaved their heads, and vowed to conquer or die. Jaḥdar son of Ḍubai'a was an ill-favoured dwarfish man with fair flowing love-locks, and he said, "O my people, if ye shave my head, ye will disfigure me. Leave my locks for the first horseman of Taghlib that shall ride forth from the glen to-morrow (I will answer for him)"; and he chanted these verses:

3

To wife and daughter
 Henceforth I am dead:
 Dust for ointment
 On my hair is shed.

¹ Hind was the mother of Bakr and Taghlib, after whom the two tribes descended from them are named. Here "Banú Hind" (the sons of Hind) refers to the Taghlibites.

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JAḤDAR SON OF ḌUBAI'A

3

Let me close with the horsemen
 Who hither ride!
 Shear my locks from me
 If I stand aside!

Well wots a mother
 If the son she bore
 And swaddled on her bosom
 And smelt him o'er,

Whenever warriors
 In the mellay meet,
 Is a puny weakling
 Or a man complete!

MUHALHIL SON OF RABI'A

HE was the brother of Kulaib and succeeded him as chief of Taghlib.

4

O night we are passing at Dhú Ḥusum, shine forth into dawn
 when thou art ended, and return not!
 If my night at al-Dhaná'ib hath been long¹, yet was I used
 to weep for the shortness of the night.
 Meseems the Kid, the Kid of the Wain, sinks prone on his
 forelegs in a rolling sky,
 Whilst Sirius and his twin star creep towards Canopus, which
 gleams like the crown of an aged camel.
 Were the graveyards dug up, so that Kulaib might be un-
 covered and know at al-Dhaná'ib what a "visitor of
 women"²
 I proved myself on the day of al-Shu'batán, his eye would be
 gladdened—but how shall we meet them that are under
 the tombs?
 And lo, at Wáridát I have left Bujair in a flow of blood like
 the unguent mixed with saffron:

¹ Because it was "a night of memories and of sighs." The grave of Kulaib was at al-Dhaná'ib in the north-eastern borders of Najd (*Agháni*, iv, 142).

² Kulaib is said to have applied these words to his brother, of whose warlike prowess he had no high opinion.

4

MUHALHIL SON OF RABÍ'A

By slaying him I tore the tents of the Banú 'Ubád—and some deed of violence is most healing to stricken hearts—
 Albeit he doth not pay fully for Kulaib, such a man as my brother was when the women rush forth from their bowers¹.
 And Hammám son of Murra: him too we have left low, over him the huge male vulture,
 Heaving up his breast in which the spear is fixed, while another great brute like a camel is tugging at him.
 And were it not for the wind, those in Ḥajr would be made to hear the clang of helmets smitten by our swordblades.
 My life for the Banú Shakīka²! the day they came like lions of the jungle that persevered in roaring,
 As though their spears were the ropes of a deep well whose walls are wide apart³,
 On the morn when beside 'Unaiza we and the sons of our father⁴ were (grinding one another) as two mill-stones turned by hand,
 And our horses standing over them all day, the horses (sweating) as though washed in a water-pool⁵.

IMRA'U 'L-ḲAIS

AUTHOR of the most famous of the *Mu'allakāt*. He was a grandson of King Ḥārith of Kinda. His father, Ḥujr, ruled for some time over the Banú Asad in central Arabia, and when they revolted and put him to death, Imra'u 'l-Ḳais came forward to avenge him. After many adventures, he set out for Constantinople, where he was honourably received by the Emperor Justinian. He died on his way back, about A.D. 540. The cause of his death is said to have been a poisoned robe sent to him by Justinian, with whose daughter he had an intrigue. Imra'u 'l-Ḳais is the oldest of the great Arabian poets and the mightiest in genius. His daring images and exquisitely worded pictures of life in the desert set

¹ On the approach of the enemy. ² The Taghlibites.

³ *I.e.* their spears were long and straight (like the rope or cord by which a bucket is let down into a well) and numerous (because in a wide well there is room for many ropes). Another point of comparison is that spears draw blood as ropes draw water.

⁴ The Bakrites. See p. 2, note 1.

⁵ *I.e.* "We pursued them hotly and stripped the dead at our leisure."

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IMRA'U 'L-ḲAIS

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the translator a hard task, which the state of the text only makes harder. The first specimen given here belongs to the *Mu'allaka*; the second is a very free, and the third a more literal rendering of passages in two of the minor odes.

5

How many a noble tent hath oped its treasure
 To me, and I have ta'en my fill of pleasure,
 Passing the warders who with eager speed
 Had slain me, if they might but hush the deed,
 What time in heaven the Pleiades unfold
 A belt of orient gems distinct with gold!
 I entered. By the curtain there stood she,
 Clad lightly as for sleep, and looked on me.
 "By God," she cried, "what reck's thee of the cost?
 I see thine ancient madness is not lost."
 I led her forth, she trailing as we go
 Her brodered skirt lest any footprint show,
 Until beyond the tents the valley sank
 With curving dunes and many a pilèd bank.
 Toward me I drew her then by side-locks both,
 Nor she—full-ankled, fine of waist—was loth.
 Fair in her colour, splendid in her grace,
 Her bosom smooth as mirror's polished face:
 A white pale virgin pearl such lustre keeps,
 Fed with clear water in untrodden deeps.
 Half-turned away, a slant soft cheek, and eye
 Of timid antelope with fawn close by,
 She lets appear; and lo, the shapely neck
 Not bare of ornament, else without a fleck,[‡]
 Whilst from her shoulders in profusion fair,
 Like clusters on the palm, down falls her coal-dark hair.

6

Love that wellnigh had ceased from welling,
 Love rose high in my heart again
 For Sulaimà, down in 'Arar dwelling,
 When Taimar's rills were alive with rain.

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6

IMRA'U 'L-ḲAIS

Oh, I see thee, Kinána's daughter,
 And the howdahs in the mist of dawn
 Gliding by, like ships on water—
 They passed and thou wert gone!—
 Like tall palms undeflowered,
 For the sword of their clan is drawn
 Until their maiden
 Boughs be laden
 With ripe yellow bunches and lowered,
 A wonder to look upon!
 Proudly the sons of Rabdá ride
 At harvest-tide.

But the women those howdahs nestled,
 More fair seemed they
 Than statues, on marble chiselled,
 Of Suḵf, in the valley where Sájúm
 Foams to the Persian bay.
 Safely fended,
 Softly tended,
 With pearls and rubies and beads of gold
 And gums of delicate odour in pyxes old,
 Spicy musk and aloes and myrrh—
 Sweet, oh, sweet is the breath of her
 Who stole from thee, Sulaimà, my love away.

The cord is cut asunder that tied me so true of yore,
 When darting a covert eye to thy tent close-veiled
 I saw thee and paled
 And trembled at the sight,
 As one trembles who overnight
 Drank deep, and in the morning his cup is filled once more.

7

(Metre: *Tawil*.)

And oft in the early morn, when birds in their nests are still,
 I ride whither he that comes to forage must fare alone—
 A spring-pasture, one kept safe by spear-heads in watch and
 ward,

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IMRA'U 'L-ḲAIS

7

And rich with the floods poured forth from many a black
storm-cloud—

On stout mare, a bay whose flesh her running made dry and
tough,

As though 'twere, so hard is it, the staff of a weaver's beam.
I scared once with her a herd of wild-kine: their skins pure
white,

Unblemished; their legs bestriped like needle-wrought
Yemen robes.

Meseemed, as they sped their pace and trotted, I saw a troop
Of horses that wheel about, with glistening saddle-cloths.

So wheeled they and set on guard behind them a lusty bull
Of long back and horn: his nose turns upward, his tail
sweeps low;

Whilst I in pursuit bore on against bull and cow alike,
And bent to the chase, what time I followed it, all my mind.
As swift as an eagle swoops and softly her wings draws in
To snatch in the morning-shine a hare on Sherabba's height—
Her eyrie around lie fresh and shrivelled the hearts of birds,
As though the jujube's red fruit were mingled with crumbling
dates—

The foxes that haunt Arwál have slunk to their holes in fear:
So under me flew the steed I hastened with hand and thighs.

Were that after which I strive my bare need, to live withal,
For me were a little wealth enough: I would seek no more;
But after renown I strive, a firm glory rooted deep,
And men such as I may win the glory most deep and firm.
How long in a man soe'er the breath of his spirit lasts,
He never will reach the end of craving or cease from toil.

ṬARAFĀ

HE took part, it is said, in the War of Basūs and afterwards visited the court of Ḥīra (near ancient Babylon), the capital of the Lakhmite kingdom. He had a bitter tongue, and some verses spoken by him so enraged 'Amr ibn Hind, the King of Ḥīra (A.D. 554-569), that he sent Ṭarafa to the governor of Baḥrain with a sealed letter containing orders to kill him. The following lines from his *Mu'allaka* illustrate the pre-Islamic view of life as

8

ṬARAFĀ

well as the character of the poet who was cut off in the flower of his days.

8

Canst thou make me immortal, O thou that blamest me so
 For haunting the battle and loving the pleasures that fly?
 If thou hast not the power to ward me from Death, let me go
 To meet him and scatter the wealth in my hand, ere I die.

Save only for three things in which noble youth take delight,
 I care not how soon rises o'er me the coronach loud:
 Wine that foams when the water is poured on it, ruddy, not
 bright,
 Dark wine that I quaff stol'n away from the cavilling crowd;
 And then my fierce charge to the rescue on back of a mare
 Wide-stepping as wolf I have startled where thirsty he cowers;
 And third, the day-long with a lass in her tent of goat's hair
 To hear the wild rain and beguile of their slowness the hours¹.

'AMR SON OF KULTHÚM

CHIEF of the tribe of Taghlib. In his *Mu'allaka* he addresses 'Amr ibn Hind, the King of Ḥīra, in terms of defiance and warns the foes of Taghlib that they will meet more than their match.

9

Up, maiden! Fetch the morning-drink and spare not
 The wine of Andarín,
 Clear wine that takes a saffron hue when water
 Is mingled warm therein.
 The lover tasting it forgets his passion,
 His heart is eased of pain;
 The stingy miser, as he lifts the goblet,
 Regardeth not his gain.
 Pass round from left to right! Why lett'st thou, maiden,
 Me and my comrades thirst?

¹ For the translation of this verse I am indebted to Mr Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, in whose beautiful version of the *Mu'allakāt* it is rendered thus: "And third, to lie the day-long, while wild clouds are wildering, close in her tent of goat's hair, the dearest beloved of me."

'AMR SON OF KULTHÚM

9

Yet am I, whom thou wilt not serve this morning,
 Of us three not the worst!
 Many a cup in Baalbec and Damascus
 And Ḳāşirín I drained,
 Howbeit we, ordained to death, shall one day
 Meet death, to us ordained.

* * * * *

And oh, my love and yearning when at nightfall
 I saw her camels haste,
 Until sharp peaks uptowered like serried swordblades
 And me Yamáma faced¹!
 Such grief no mother-camel feels, bemoaning
 Her young one lost, nor she,
 The grey-haired woman whose hard fate hath left her
 Of nine sons graves thrice three.

* * * * *

Father of Hind², take heed and ere thou movest
 Rashly against us, learn
 That still our banners go down white to battle
 And home blood-red return.
 And many a chief bediadem'd, the champion
 Of the outlaws of the land,
 Have we o'erthrown and stripped him, whilst around him
 Fast-reined the horses stand.
 Our neighbours lopped like thorn-trees, snarls in terror
 Of us the demon-hound³;
 Never we try our handmill on the foemen
 But surely they are ground.
 We are the heirs of glory, all Ma'add knows⁴,
 Our lances it defend,
 And when the tent-pole tumbles in the foray,
 Trust us to save our friend!

* * * * *

¹ Here the poet describes his grief at the departure of his beloved, whom he sees in imagination reaching her journey's end in distant Yamáma.

² Hind was the name of 'Amr's mother and also of his daughter.

³ Even the *ʔinn* (spirits) stand in awe of us.

⁴ Ma'add signifies the Arabs in general, excluding Yemen.

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10 ‘AMR SON OF KULTHÚM

O ‘Amr, what mean’st thou? Are we, we of Taghlib,
 Thy princeling’s retinue?
 O ‘Amr, what mean’st thou, rating us and hearkening
 To tale-bearers untrue?
 O ‘Amr, ere thee full many a time our spear-shaft
 Hath baffled foes to bow:
 Nipped in the vice, it kicks like a wild camel
 That will no touch allow—
 Like a wild camel, so it creaks in bending
 And splits the bender’s brow!

* * * * *

Well know, when our tents rise along their valleys,
 The men of every clan
 That we give death to them that durst attempt us,
 To friends what food we can;
 That staunchly we maintain a cause we cherish,
 Camp where we choose to ride,
 Nor will we aught of peace, when we are angered,
 Till we be satisfied.
 We keep our vassals safe and sound, but rebels
 We soon force to their knees;
 And if we reach a well, we drink pure water,
 Others the muddy lees.
 Ours is the earth and all thereon: when *we* strike,
 There needs no second blow;
 Kings lay before the new-weaned boy of Taghlib
 Their heads in homage low.
 We are called oppressors, being none, but shortly
 A true name shall it be¹!
 We have so filled the earth, ’tis narrow for us,
 And with our ships the sea!

ZUHAIR

THE War of Dáhis was between the tribes of ‘Abs and Dhubyán. After it had continued for many years, two chieftains of Dhubyán—Harim son of Sinán and Ḥárith son of ‘Auf—paid over to the

¹ *I.e.* we will show our enemies that we cannot be defied with impunity.