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ترجمان الكنوز
INTERPRETER of TREASURES

PART 4:

Perils

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This is the fourth of the author's six collections of eclectic, occasionally irreverent, excerpts from the vast treasure-house of Arabic literature. In each, he samples and comments thematically, seeking that which is insightful, prescient or poignant, as well as the curious, mischievous or wisely satirical. Like that of the original authors, his goal, and ours, is to entertain, educate and enlighten.

—*The Editors*

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NEAR THE BEGINNING OF HIS BOOK of descriptive geography and adventure, *The Best of Divisions*, the 10th-century traveler al-Maqdisi listed some of the perils he had encountered in his 20 years of wanderings. These include getting lost in the desert and almost drowned at sea, escaping murderers and highwaymen, and losing his money and literally the shirt off his back. "What a difference there is," he concluded, "between someone who compiles a book from hearsay in the comfort of his home, and someone who writes having experienced such difficulties."

He is right, of course: Perils are good to write and read about only when they are over and done with, or have happened to someone else. An almost exact contemporary of al-Maqdisi, the Iraqi judge al-Tanukhi, realized this and compiled a whole collection of supposedly true tales of remarkable escapes called *Relief After Distress*—and a very good read they are, too.

This miniature collection of perils, mostly from my library (one is from a beach in Oman, another from a *suq* in the Sahara), begins with some appropriately miniature dangers remembered by Ibn al-Hajj al-Numayri, a 14th-century judge and author of Granada. His judicial work took him on circuits of the rural areas of the Spanish sultanate, where he often had to share his accommodation with numerous small and unwelcome bedfellows. In one village, he recalled,

Also called al-Muqaddasi. Both names show that he was a native of Jerusalem—in Arabic, al-Quds, Bayt al-Maqdis or al-Bayt al-Muqaddas.

His varied output included works on comedy and sleep, and a dictionary of double entendre.

I was taken into a house with cramped passageways, as intensely dark as the blackest night, which brought to mind the grave and its terrors and banished memories of my loved ones. Or rather, it was worse than the grave, for it was full of fetid mud that stuck to me, and fleas like the seeds threshed from flax, and mosquitoes that pierced me all the while with their lances and were never satisfied till they'd drunk their fill, and bugs that fell on me like morning dew and marched over my mattress like an advancing enemy, and speckled snakes appearing from every hole in the wall, and vipers whose bite would make your flesh fall off, and the constant humming moan of the wind, and thieves who never ceased to terrify. In short, the only difference from being incarcerated in a prison cell was that they gave me a rug—and that had been in use so long that it was black.

I.e., "sulfur" (why?). His Winter and Summer Journey describes travels through Egypt and Syria to Istanbul.

But, as the Arabic saying goes, "Many a nuisance has its uses" ("Every cloud..."), and even fleas have their beneficial side—at least according to an unnamed poet quoted by the 17th-century traveler and native of Madinah, Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Musawi, known as "Kibrit." A literal translation shows how the verse depends entirely on a clever (or you might say awful) pun:

Do not hate the flea [*burguth*], for its name
is *birr* [kindness] and *ghawth* [assistance] for you, if you only know:
Its "kindness" is to suck corrupt blood,
and the "assistance" is to wake you for the dawn [prayer].

The pun works even better visually: short vowels and doubled consonants are not usually indicated in Arabic script, so brghwth and br + ghwth look identical on the page.

As in law, so in poetry: The spirit is as important as the letter. Here is an attempt to catch that spirit in a non-literal translation. Having failed to find suitable plays on the English word *flea*, I looked up the scientific name of the insect, and found it belongs to the order *Siphonaptera*:

A flea by any other name would drive you hopping mad,
But call it "siphonapteran"—you'll see it's not all bad:
It comes to *siphon* off bad blood that tends to cause us harm,
And as a dawn-prayer wake-up there's no *apter an* alarm.

Perhaps the pun is indeed the lowest form of wit. It is certainly the lowest form of poetry. Some of the other verses on minor perils of the night quoted by Kibrit do, however, hit a more elevated poetic note. This one is also unascribed.

Mosquitoes quaffed my blood to an accompaniment
Of all the themes and variations their choir sings.
And for this diverse night-music their instrument
Was *me*—a human violin with veins for strings.

Of course, the slow and dangerous business of travel was filled with many greater perils than insects, no travel more than the pilgrimage to Makkah. Ibn Jubayr of Valencia, who recounted his own 12th-century pilgrimage in what is perhaps the most brilliantly written travel book in the language, described the crossing of Egypt's Eastern Desert to the port of 'Aydhab on the Red Sea. One arrives there, he said, "looking like a corpse resurrected from its shroud." But worse was to come on the sea crossing to Jiddah:

The conduct of the people of 'Aydhab toward the pilgrims is governed by unholy laws. For they pack them into the *jalbahs* so tightly that they end up sitting on top of each other, and the boats resemble crowded chicken-coops. The reason for this is the shippers' greed for fares, which is such that the owner of a *jalbah* will aim to recoup the cost of his vessel in a single trip; after that, he cares nothing at all about what happens to the boat on later voyages. They say, "We'll look after our hulls, and the pilgrims can look after their souls," and this is a well-known proverb among them.

The jalbah was a medium-sized vessel used to carry goods and passengers. The word is obscurely connected to the old English term "jolly-boat."

700 years later, dhow skippers on the Red Sea crossing were still unscrupulous in their dealings with pilgrims. "Only too often," recalled Laurence Grafftey-Smith, a British diplomat in Jiddah in the 1920's, "the skipper would land them in the wilds, a hundred miles and more south of Jiddah, and leave them to die there, telling them that Jiddah was but a mile or two away." I too have heard horror stories about the crossing, from Somali refugees in Yemen.

Sea perils are, of course, more often natural than man-made. Here is one of the greatest Arabic descriptions of a storm—one experienced by the Algerian-born writer al-Maqqari on a voyage to Egypt in the early 17th century. I have tried to catch something of the flavor of the original rhyming prose:

What with the din of storms and waters, we abandoned hope of getting out alive and well—// may God give neither life nor succor to that fearful swell! // The waves applauded when they heard the voices of the winds, and raved, and came to blows, // as if they'd drunk a draft that sent them into frenzy's throes—// now far, now near they rose, // waves in squads at odds with one another, // clapping and slapping, dashing and clashing with one another, // until you'd think the hands of the air // had grabbed them by the hair // and dragged them from their deepest lair, // and you'd all but see the bed of the sea between those waves laid bare, // and their crests flying high to wrest the clouds from the sky in their snare, // till fear and illness made each soul confront destruction's stare, // and all resolve threatened to dissolve in despair, // and imagination conjured up the worst that could be feared, // as death in every shape before our

Felicitously, the word for "swell"—here hawl—more usually means "terror," as in Abu 'l-Hawl, "the Father of Terror," the Arabic name of the Sphinx.

> eyes appeared, // and the sails barged in pell-mell to brave // the armies of the swell that charged us, wave on wave, // while there we sat, each one of us, storm-sick, // and helpless as a tick upon a stick.

Al-Maqqari would no doubt have been comforted by the following prayer. I came across it en route to the Kuria Muria Islands, off the southern coast of Oman. It was carved on the stern of an old wooden sailing vessel, beached at the small port of Sad'h.

> In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
> O Protector of souls in hulls
> O Savior of hulls in the fathomless sea
> Protect for us this *sambuq* called *Al-Dhib*
> O God, O Sustainer, O God, O Protector

A strange echo, across seas and centuries, of the last sentence of that passage from Ibn Jubayr, above.

The sambuq is the later equivalent of the jalbah. Al-Dhib means "the Wolf."

The inscription was dated 5 Rajab 1371 (March 31, 1952). Later, by one of those beautiful coincidences of travel, I stayed with the grandson of the Wolf's owner; the owner's son—my host's father—had done the calligraphy for the prayer. The Wolf, I learned, had carried frankincense to Aden, Basrah and India, and dried shark to East Africa.

Turning to the perils of travel in general, they are neatly summed up in a verse I heard recited while stuck in a market in Mauritania.

> Don't ever go a-roving, O my friend, if you'd
> Escape the seven circles of the traveler's hell.
> The first's a haunt of homesick thoughts and solitude,
> The second's where your fears for far-off family dwell.
> The third's a den of thieves, the fourth's the latitude
> Where rogues rip off an unsuspecting clientele.
> Then come the hells of lonely nights and nasty food.
> The last, and worst: the Hades of the Bad Hotel.

The poem, attributed (I later discovered) to the 11th-century Andalusian scholar and traveler Abu Bakr al-Tartushi, is a parody of a famous verse listing five benefits of travel.

Let us return now to seemingly minor perils that had major consequences. The first comes from the *Short History of Abu 'l-Fida*, ruler of Hamah in Syria, and recounts the story of the death in 1277 in Damascus of al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars, the celebrated Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria.

Other accounts attribute the sultan's death to natural causes or to a wound received in battle. However, Abu 'l-Fida is not alone in giving this more lurid version.

> Among the various accounts of his death, the following story was told. A total eclipse of the moon occurred, and rumors spread among the populace that this presaged the death of a man of very great rank. Hearing this, al-Malik al-Zahir decided to make sure someone else fulfilled this prediction. So he summoned a scion of the Ayyubid dynasty called al-Malik al-Qahir … having first had some poisoned *qumizz* prepared. The sultan told the cup-bearer to pour some of this out for al-Malik al-Qahir. He did so, and the the Ayyubid drank some of it. No sooner had his guest drunk than al-Malik al-Zahir, in a moment of forgetfulness, took a swig from the same glass. Al-Malik al-Qahir died immediately. As for al-Malik al-Zahir, he fell ill with a burning fever and expired later.

The Ayyubids were the former rulers of the region.

Qumizz (English "kumiss"), a drink made from fermented mares' milk, was a favorite of the Turkic peoples from whom Baybars and the other early Mamluks descended.

The earliest and most notorious of such assassinations in Arabic literature was that of the poet Imru' al-Qays in about 540 CE: He was supposedly killed by a poisoned shirt. Less well known, but equally ingenious, was an assassination in Tunis mentioned by al-Maqdisi—by means of poisoned toothpaste! (Was the poison in the stripes?)

It could of course be argued that the story illustrates a number of other perils—those of believing in superstitious *suq* gossip, of sharing tableware and, not least, those of abusing the rules of hospitality by murdering your guests.

The dangers of frequenting the courts of autocrats are well documented. As one poet said, the three greatest perils are "seas, sultans and the march of Time." In the case of sultans, apparently minor slips of etiquette could prove perilous, if not fatal. The 14th-century encyclopedist al-'Umari, for example, says that at the West African court of the emperor of Mali, sneezing was one of the biggest social gaffes:

> If one of the courtiers suddenly feels the need to sneeze, he will throw himself on the floor and sneeze in such a way that no one is aware of it. As for the emperor, if he should sneeze, then all those present hit their chests with their hands.

The consequences of a standing sneeze are not spelled out. But al-Qalqashandi, a later encyclopedist, noted the penalty for a different breach of court manners—forgetting to take off your footwear. If anyone walks into the emperor's court in sandals, he says,

> he is killed without mercy, regardless of whether his error was intentional or not.

According to the 12th-century geographer al-Idrisi, the female rulers of the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives cracked down on sandal-wearers in almost as draconian a fashion:

> In these islands no one walks about in sandals, with the single exception of the queen. And if they find out that someone else has worn sandals, his feet are cut off.

Visitors to the archipelago today may go shod with impunity. According to the Arabic History of the Maldives, the sandal ban was repealed by a 17th-century ruler.

Staying with rulers, but turning to the perils of linguistic misunderstandings, the following tale is told by the 13th-century geographer Yaqut in his gazetteer entry for Zafar:

Now little more than a village in the central highlands of Yemen, Zafar is still littered with the ruins of its greatness in the early centuries of our era. The Himyaris, whose capital it was, spoke one of the ancient South Arabian languages, related to but distinct from the Arabic of central and northern Arabia.

> It was the seat of the kings of Himyar, and the origin of the saying, "When in Zafar, speak as the Himyaris do." According to al-Asma'i, an Arabic-speaking man arrived for an audience with one of the Himyari kings. The king, who happened to be up on a high roof terrace of his palace, said to the man, "*Thib!* [Jump!]" So the man jumped off and was smashed to pieces. At this, the king said, "We have none of that Arabickte here. When in Zafar, one must speak as the Himyaris do." In the Himyari tongue, *thib* means "be seated."

A celebrated early Islamic antiquarian.

"Arabickte" is an attempt to imitate the king's quaint and antiquated-sounding rendering of the word—Arabiyyat for Arabiyyah.

As for the third of those great perils, the march of Time, even if its consequences are ultimately inescapable, some of them—like gray hair—may be overcome by artifice or wit. The following story is told of Yahya ibn Hakam, a ninth-century Andalusian poet and diplomat who was nicknamed "the Gazelle" on account of his youthful good looks.

By Ibn Dihya, a disgraced Andalusian judge who took to traveling and died in Cairo in 1235. Ibn Dihya's reputation as a historian is not high, but I like to think this anecdote is true.

> It happened that the Gazelle was sent on an embassy to the land of the Majus. At the time, he was approaching 50 years of age and quite gray-haired, although he was still completely fit and healthy. One day, the wife of the king asked him how old he was. Being in a playful mood, he told her he was 20. She said, "So what's with all this gray hair?" And he replied, "What's wrong with gray hair? Or don't you know that just because a young stallion's coat is gray it doesn't stop him siring foals?" The queen was delighted with this retort.

The Norsemen. It is unclear whether the anecdote is set in their native Scandinavia or in one of their overseas settlements—Dublin, for example.

This was clearly going too far. According to Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, the age to be is 35: "London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained 35 for years."

Some of the perils of Time are, however, insuperable. Here is the nonagenarian 12th-century Syrian nobleman and warrior Usamah ibn Munqidh reflecting in his memoirs on the effects of old age:

> I wonder that my hand, too weak to hold a pen,
> Speared lions long ago in its young day;
> That when I walk with stick in hand the ground,
> Though solid, clings beneath my feet like clay.

As the poet Abu 'l-'Atahiyah is supposed to have said,

> If only our young selves could visit us one day
> And see what Time has done to us when we are grey.

Isma'il ibn al-Qasim al-Jarrar (748–828), is usually known by this nickname ("Father of Stupidity"). His surname, al-Jarrar, "the Jar-Seller," comes from his day job as a purveyor of pots. Fellow-poets, it is said, would come to his shop and use shards of broken crockery to jot down their latest gems.

Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tarjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." Tarjuman is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).

Tim Mackintosh-Smith (tim@mackintosh-smith.com) recently appeared in *Newsweek*'s list of the top dozen travel writers of the last 100 years. Following his award-winning trilogy of travels in the footsteps of Ibn Battutah, he is working on a history, a thriller set in 14th-century Spain and the translation from Arabic of an early collection of travelers' accounts from around the Indian Ocean.

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