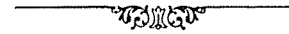


THE SUBTLE RUSE
The Book of Arabic Wisdom and Guile



TRANSLATED BY
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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Author's preface | 10 |
| I The value of intelligence and what has been said about it | 21 |
| II The incentive to employ ruses and how to carry them out | 26 |
| III The Wisdom of God, His beneficence and the perfect way in which He organises things for the good of His servants | 30 |
| IV The ruses of angels and jinn | 63 |
| V The ruses of prophets, may salvation be unto them! | 100 |
| VI The ruses of Caliphs, Kings and Sultans | 137 |
| VII The ruses of Viziers, Governors and administrators | 234 |
| VIII The ruses of judges, honourable witnesses and attorneys | 288 |
| IX The ruses of jurisconsults | 312 |
| X The ruses of devout men and those practising asceticism | 320 |
| Notes | 338 |

to do what she wanted, so she has played this trick on me to make me marry her. But I do not want her.

– Stay there, the Caliph ordered him.

He summoned the woman and said to her privately:

– I will give you to him in marriage if you tell me the truth, he declared. Has there been anything between you or not?

– He forced me to make love against my will, she replied.

This proves it.

Then the Caliph – may God's blessing and peace be unto him – said:

– Qunbur, bring me some very hot water.

His manservant brought it to him. He took the woman's garment and soaked it in the water for a moment. The white of egg came off. When Ali – may salvation be unto him – saw that, he cried out:

– It is only white of egg. Bring the whips.

The whips were brought to him.

– Give that woman, he commanded, the number of lashes laid down by law for slanderers.

Then he released the man who had been wrongfully accused.

Assessment of damage

That illustrious master and worthy benefactor Jamal al-Din Abu-Abdallah Hussein al-Raqqam, chief adviser at the court, has told me about this ruse of Ali, son of Abu-Talib – may God's blessings and peace be unto him.

I read, he told me, in a book at the College of al-Shara'i which is situated at the end of the Sultan's Market in Baghdad how two men came to Ali, son of Abu-Talib – may salvation be unto him – to settle a legal difference. One of them claimed that the other had thrown a stone at him and hit him in the eye, so impairing his vision. He wanted his adversary to compensate him for the damage he had caused.

Ali – may salvation be unto him – said:

– Bandage the man's injured eye.

Then he gave a stone to one of his attendants, saying:

– Move away, holding the stone in your hand, and stop when the plaintiff cannot see it any more.

The man kept on walking until it was no longer visible to the man with the bandaged eye. Then Ali said:

– Measure the distance between the plaintiff and the stone.

The distance was calculated. Then they bandaged the undamaged eye and exposed the injured one. The stone was moved away, as before. They took the distance between the two places at which the stone was still visible. It came to one-third of the distance from which the uninjured eye could see the stone. Ali made the man who had done the damage pay two-thirds of the sum fixed for the complete loss of an eye.

The mother who rejected her son

A lawsuit in which the two parties were a son and his mother was brought to a happy conclusion, thanks to a clever plan by Ali – may salvation be unto him. A boy had been dogging a woman's footsteps. According to him, she was his mother, although she refused to acknowledge him as her son. He maintained that his father had died leaving money and the woman had taken it for herself, so that he had nothing. Both were summoned before Ali's tribunal – may the most glorious salvation be unto him. He questioned the woman about the boy's claims. She denied them, saying:

– I have people who will come and testify that I have never been married.

Ali called the witnesses. They appeared and testified that the woman in question had never been married and that enemies had prevailed upon the boy to make those allegations. Ali – may salvation be unto him – gave the command:

– Call a midwife.

A midwife was duly fetched.

– See if the woman accused is a virgin or married.

She took her into the bath-house. The young woman promised her one hundred gold pieces if she pronounced her to be a virgin. When the midwife came out, she proclaimed:

– Oh Master, this girl is a virgin.

– My boy, said Ali – may salvation be unto him – , the evidence of all these people is in agreement – the woman you accuse is a virgin and has not been married.

The boy exclaimed:

– Oh Ali, where is all the knowledge passed on to you by the Messenger of God – may God's blessing be unto him and his family – and to which you have fallen heir?

– That knowledge is still with me, replied Ali.

He cried out in anger against the young woman, then asked her:

– Is there a guardian appointed in your family?

– I have no guardian but the Most High God, she replied.

Turning to the boy, he asked him likewise:

– Is there a guardian appointed in your family?

– I have no guardian but God, replied the boy.

Ali declared:

– I am taking you into my care. I will give this young woman to you in marriage for one hundred gold pieces, which I will credit to your account.

– I accept that marriage contract, replied the boy.

Just before this, Ali had taken the boy aside – may salvation be unto him – and advised him to agree to the proposal.

Ali said to him:

– Arise and take your wife.

The boy got up and seized the woman by the hand. When she was in no doubt that the scheme would be put into effect, she exclaimed:

– Oh Ali, is this how the Messenger of God – may God's blessing be unto him and his family – has commanded you to behave, marrying a son off to his mother? By God, this boy is my son. I am not going to forfeit the goods of this world and of the next by adhering to what I said before.

Ali acted as peacemaker between the boy and his mother, and they both went on their way. He summoned the witnesses and the midwife, sentenced them to the number of lashes prescribed for liars and then put them in prison.

The woman and the two swindlers

The following case was also settled by a ruse of Ali's – may salvation be unto him. Two individuals came in search of a certain woman one day and placed a hundred gold pieces in her keeping, saying:

– Do not give it back to any one of us unless the other is present.

They left her and did not see her for a year. Then one of the two came to her and said:

– My companion is dead. Give the money back to me.

She refused, saying:

– I will only give it back if you are both present.

He kept pestering her and won over the woman's neighbours. They went on nagging her until she gave the man the sum entrusted to her. She was left in peace for a year. Then the companion of the first man came and said to her:

– Give the money back to me.

– Your partner came and told me that you were dead. So I handed the gold pieces to him, she replied.

They had an argument and asked Ali – may salvation be unto him – to settle it. Ali realised at once that the two men had planned to swindle the woman. He declared – may salvation be unto him:

– The gold pieces are in my keeping. Tell your companion to come to me, the man you have mentioned, and take them, as it is not lawful for the woman to hand them over to one of you unless the other is present.

The man left the woman and departed, never to return.

The impotent husband

Ali – may salvation be unto him – used cunning to find out what truth there was in the allegations of a woman who had come to complain to him – may salvation be unto him – that her husband was impotent and could not consummate their marriage. He summoned the husband and asked him if this was true. The husband denied it. He still loved his wife and did not want to be parted from her, whereas she had chosen to leave him. Then the Emir of the Faithful, Ali – may salvation be unto him – summoned a midwife and ordered her to pack aromatic substances into the woman's vagina unbeknown to the husband. Then he ordered him to climb on to his wife and gave him a handkerchief to wipe himself with after he had done it and show it to him.

When the husband met his wife in a private place with no one else about, he could not perform the conjugal act. They both left the room. Ali – may salvation be unto him – asked for the handkerchief. He saw no trace of pollution on it and said to the man:

– You are impotent. There can be no possible doubt about that.

Then he passed judgement – the man was to be divorced from his wife.