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MARCUS AURELIUS

John Lyth

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MARCUS AURELIUS
A
RENDERING IN VERSE

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Marcus Aurelius
JOHN LYTH

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MARCUS AURELIUS
A RENDERING IN VERSE

by

JOHN LYTH

PREFACE

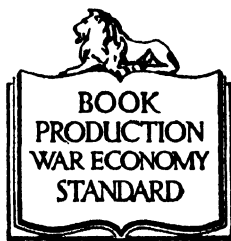
by

PROFESSOR GILBERT MURRAY

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WOKING

The P.E.N. is a world association of writers. Its object is to promote and maintain friendship and intellectual co-operation between writers in all countries, in the interests of literature, freedom of artistic expression, and international goodwill.

The author of this book is a member of the P.E.N., but the opinions expressed in it are his personal views and are not necessarily those of any other member.

P R E F A C E

THIS little volume needs no excuse. Dr. Lyth, whose Muse has been a welcome guest in various journals, has ventured here upon an interesting experiment. Readers who have felt the magical beauty of FitzGerald's *Omar Khayyám* must sometimes have wondered whether some more adequate and less helpless philosophy would not yield a similar harvest of poetry. Cannot the Stoic appeal to our sense of beauty as well as the Epicurean or the mere Hedonist? FitzGerald took little interest in the doctrines of the *Rubá'iyát*; indeed he repudiated all belief in them. It was the poetry that he cared for. Dr. Lyth's attitude is different. He writes to me, "I trust that lovers of the *Meditations* will not find that I have done injustice to the thoughts of the Master; and if the verses achieve publication now, when we are fighting for the freedom of the mind which Marcus Aurelius valued above all else, I hope others may find in reading them that regulation of perspective which I have found in their composition, and which shows even this War to be a not very large incident in the Story of the Universe."

He might have gone straight to the poetry of the

Stoics, like Cleanthes' famous hymn. He might have selected the more imaginative or mystical elements in Stoicism, such as the conception of the Universe as One Great City of Men and Gods, held together by Love—not mere Charity, but Eros, Love in its most intense and spiritual sense. But he has deliberately chosen as the main quarry for his digging the Stoic who is least rhetorical, least showy, and least anxious to amuse his readers, while admitting also a few paragraphs from Epictetus (vv. 16, 17, 32, 33, 34, 37 and 38), the public lecturer and preacher. He is specially indebted to Jackson's *Translation of the Meditations*, the Clarendon Press, and Matheson's *Translation of Epictetus*, Oxford University Press.

Epictetus,

“By birth a slave, by poverty downtrod,
In body crippled and beloved of God”

was a professional who knew how to stir his audience and drive home his points. Marcus, the Emperor, for all his simplicity, is somehow less accessible. The original from which Dr. Lyth draws was not a public lecture, like those of Epictetus, much less a poem like Omar's *Rubá'iyát*. It was a series of private reflections, and those,

we ought to remember, the reflections of a very hard-worked man. As a good Stoic, Marcus was bound to accept with resignation the failure of all his hopes and efforts if it proved to be the Will of God that they should fail; but we must not forget that, as a good Stoic, he was also bound to work his hardest, indifferent to death or suffering, co-operating according to his lights with that Will, for the good of man and the wise ruling of his great Empire. One must not think of him as one content to sit passive and let his neighbours perish so long as his own "Virtue" was intact.

There is a fragment of truth in Omar; a far nobler and, one may hope, larger fragment in Marcus; fragments more in the various other attempts of man to read the mystery surrounding him and expound in human language things beyond the range of human knowledge. Full truth, no doubt, these efforts cannot attain, but they can, in their different ways, give guidance and attain beauty.

GILBERT MURRAY

MARCUS AURELIUS

I

This thing thou call'st "Thyself," what is it, Friend?
The bones—the flesh—the taking in of breath—
Aware already of impending death?
What else remains but Reason in the end?
Bind not this greatest gift, nor toss away
Unheeded till thy body reach decay.

2

Though this thy life should last three thousand years,
And still three thousand times a hundredfold,
Yet no man loses what he doth not hold;
Nor past nor future should command thy tears;
The present only all thou hast to lose,
And only that brief moment Death shall choose.

3

Thy passage taken, crossing made, farewell
To seas and ships, 'tis time to disembark;
If to another life—all's well; but mark—
If to oblivion, then too all is well:
Reason triumphant snaps its earthly chain
No longer slave to pleasure or to pain.

4

A little thing the life of any man;
A little thing the corner of this earth
He calls his home; so too of little worth
Is past renown—for in a race, who ran?
'Tis tossed from mouth to mouth, yet who can say
Which was the victor of a far-off day?

5

By Reason only let thy course be laid,
Then follow steadfast as the ships that go,
Content with this thy gift, but guard as though
A loan at any time to be repaid.
Then will thy days be blest, nor doth he live
Can rob thee of the best the gods shall give.

6

Turn not thy thoughts on him who does thee wrong ;
Recall how they who lived in enmity
Are now what he and thou so soon will be—
A little ash, a name not overlong.
Serene and free, seek thou that little plot
Which is thyself, where enmity is not.

7

All things have beauty he that will may find ;
Even the autumn of the passing years
When falls the fruit and bow the golden ears
Kindles new pleasure in the thoughtful mind.
Who measures with mature and equal gauge
Sees beauty in the mellow mien of age.

8

The beautiful hath beauty self-contained ;
Nor praise nor blame can change its excellence.
Shall emeralds pale for lack of recompense ?
Without applause must swords with rust be stained,
Or purple fade, or ivory grow old,
Or censure mar the radiancy of gold ?

9

Say, wouldst thou live in luxury—or worse?
Observe the ants, the spiders and the bees,
Each striving to set right, beneath the trees,
Their little corner of the Universe;
Wilt thou be less than these in their degree?
Nay, take thy task which Nature planned for thee.

10

Wouldst thou seek happiness in wealth or power?
Lo, here is one that hath been consul thrice,
Pompous with lands and weight of merchandise,
And he bewails his fortune every hour!
Yet others in the Halls of Wisdom sit
With neither cloak nor goods nor aught but wit!

11

Should some god say "To-morrow thou shalt die,
Or on the third day," would that respite bring
Repose, or seem to thee a little thing?
Consider Time's long corridors which lie
Behind thee and before, whether Death smite
From untold years or with the morrow's light.

12

Be as a cliff round which the billows break
And break again, but firm it stands, and then
The seething waters sink to rest again.
Greet not misfortune with despair, but take
Comfort from this, that even such a blow
May buffet thee but cannot lay thee low.

13

Live out thy life as at thy journey's end;
But if mayhap men prove too strong for thee
Then get thee gone, nor dream thy death to be
The greatest trial which the gods can send.
I quit this room, whose smoke gives me offence—
Is this a matter of great consequence?

14

Life's tide bears all things past, but is there one
On which a man may set his heart? For see,
The child would woo a sparrow on a tree;
But ere his love shall dawn, the bird has flown.
Then seek Philosophy and on her breast
Again and yet again thou shalt find rest.

15

What folly this! that man will ever be
Scornful of manners and of men he knows,
Yet seek in future ages fame from those
He has not seen and may not hope to see.
'Twould be as wise to sorrow all thy days
Because thy forebears did not chant thy praise!

16

“Lo, I am rich, and have no need of aught!”
Why then dost thou profess philosophy?
Thy gold and silver are enough for thee.
“But Caesar wrote me Justice of the Court!”
Made thee a Judge? Then let him write thy name
Master of Music—thou art still the same!

17

“I am a poor man of no consequence!”
But what affair of thine is it to buy
This pride of place and purple pageantry?
Nor robe nor crown shall mark thy eminence;
Only the powers thou dost thyself control
Can testify the greatness of thy soul.

• 18

Pay earnest heed to that which others say
And seek to enter thou the speaker's mind;
If wrong in thought or deed thyself shalt find
Then gladly change the error of thy way.
Seek only Truth, which shall not bring defeat;
Hurt lies with ignorance and self-deceit.

19

Art thou cast down because thy weight is yet
Less than three hundred or a thousand pounds?
Then why bewail the span of time which bounds
Thy little spirit with a corpse beset?
Contented with the space which is thy lot,
Why hunger for the years which thou hast not?

20

The yapping of a pack of curs at strife;
The work of toiling, burden-bearing ants;
Scurry of frightened mice; and he who vaunts
A puppet show—such are the things of life.
Stand thou without contempt and yet apart,
Thy value that on which is set thy heart.

21

Like wax in Nature's hands all substance is ;
She moulds a horse ; destroys, and makes a tree—
Perchance a man—the life of each to be
One fleeting glimpse of Time's eternities.
Thy changing elements yet changeless are—
Thou hast a part as set as yonder star.

22

The ills of man are such as will be past ;
Nor pain nor heat nor cold but have an end ;
Fatigue or sickness—what the gods shall send—
Can only hurt thy body while they last.
Shorn of imagined terrors thou wilt find
They have no means to overcome the mind.

23

No longer thine the privilege to live
Thy whole life well, for part of it is gone ;
And neither sophistry nor yet renown,
Pleasure nor wealth, shall lasting comfort give.
The best thy life hath in reserve for thee—
To make thee just and temperate, brave and free.

24

The realms an Alexander may coerce—
How small to those a Socrates perceives!
The one a master of so many thieves—
The other brooding on the Universe.
Thy spirit thou thyself alone canst bind;
Nor sword nor tyranny shall touch the mind.

25

Consider, when a stranger cross thy path:
“What thought hath he of Pleasure or of Pain,
Of Evil and of Good, and yet again
Of Fame and Infamy, of Life and Death?”
Then think it no strange thing if thou shalt see
His every action as his thought to be.

26

The end of all things from the first is planned.
Much as an idle boy throws up a ball:
What gains it from its rise? Or from its fall
What loses, on its journey to the hand?
Dost thou condemn a bubble when 'tis burst—
Blest while it held, and when it parted, curst?

27

Strive not to comprehend thy whole life's task
Nor every burden falling to thy share ;
Consider rather if thou canst not bear
The trials which the passing time shall ask.
Free of past evil and of future fears
How tolerable thy present grief appears !

28

If from without thy source of trouble prove,
Then either act and let thy grieving be,
Or change thy mind on that which troubles thee.
Canst thou not change, nor thy unease remove,
Nor live thy life with this thy act undone—
Then cease to curse thy fortune and begone.

29

The mind untouched by passion or revolt
A fortress is, secure against attack,
Whereto a man may flee, nor shall he lack
The means thereafter to defy assault.
Ill-starred who hath not yet this refuge seen,
Who finds and loses, thrice a fool hath been.

30

Though men should slay thy body, carve thy limbs
And curse thy soul, what boots it to the mind?
He who reviles a living spring will find
The sweet and limpid water ever brims;
Though he befoul with dung and fill with clay,
Soon without stain the waters flow away.

31

Who knows the purpose of the Universe,
Discerning what he is or whence he came?
Then wilt thou court the praise or shun the blame
Of him who knows not when to bless or curse?
The clamorous multitude who fail to please
Themselves or others—what hast thou with these?

32

Is there a feast and has one bid thee not?
It may be that thou hast not paid the price
In flattery; without such merchandise
How wilt thou purchase that which must be bought?
Yet hast thou recompense in other wise—
Not to have praised whom thou canst but despise.

33

Dost thou fear hunger? Nay, but thou dost dread
Humiliations poverty may bring,
With none to hasten at thy beckoning.
Thou wilt not starve while thou canst earn thy bread—
But must have slaves to watch thy every breath
And wait on thee as one sick unto death!

34

Be not indignant if thy slave transgress.
A little oil is spilt, or wine astray?
All things must have their price; be wise and say:
"This is the purchase paid for happiness."
'Twere better that thy slave should serve thee ill
Than have the gift to anger thee at will.

35

Indifferent to pleasure and to pain
Nature created both, nor preference hath
For fame or infamy, for life or death.
Then follow Nature's footsteps and remain
Alike unmoved, thy prayer, without regret:
"Thy coming hasten, Death, lest I forget!"

36

The Universe moves on from age to age ;
And if the Master Mind by separate quest
Produces each effect, contented rest ;
If from one act descends our heritage,
Still all is well, if any God there be—
If chance rules all, let chance not govern thee.

37

The Dice of Life are cast ; we cannot know
How they may fall nor what our score will be ;
But carefully and skilfully may we
Arrange the numbers that the gods shall throw.
Then think not that the game is overpast
While life is left to play the dice thou hast.

38

At anchor on the tide our ship swings slow ;
We sit distraught, forever peering forth—
“How stands the wind?”—“The wind is in the North.”—
“Of what avail! When will the West wind blow?”
“The gods know best, who rule the sky and sea ;
Since thou art blameless, what is that to thee?”

39

How soon must we descend into the ground!
Mortals will rise to follow in our stead;
Wave upon wave these dwarfs of men will tread,
With wisdom and affairs of state profound!
Then seek thy task, nor turn thy head to see
Thy neighbour's path; suffice thine own for thee.

40

Philip of Macedon and all his kind—
Did they but strut the boards with crowds agape—
Stage heroes these, whom none is bound to ape?
Or did they follow Nature with clear mind?
Philosophy is simple and sublime—
Seduce not me to pride and pantomime.

41

How poor the stuff of all our worldly goods!
Corrupt as are our bodies, so are these—
Our marbles but the dregs of earth-bound seas;
Silver and gold the sediment of floods.
Nor after-fame nor present glory sought,
Nor aught that is, is worth a moment's thought.

42

The gods have power—or they have it not:
If not, why pray to them? But if they have,
Then why not pray for strength to cease to grieve
For that which thou shalt lack beyond thy lot?
Or use the power which is thine indeed,
And scorn to ask for aid thou dost not need!

43

Think what revolting creatures men! For look—
How must they eat and sleep and breed perchance!
Yet see them in their pomp and arrogance—
So swift to wrath, so lordly in rebuke!
Their bodies but the slaves of yesterday;
Again a little while, and where are they?

44

Thy life is spent where custom makes it sweet,
Or roaming at thy will the countryside;
Again, thou diest—there is naught beside.
Then make thy choice; but know that man's retreat
To solitude, in his own breast may be,
As on the mountain top, or with the sea.

45

Remember, acts and scenes which now arise
In that same fashion went in ages past,
Nor deem that thou thyself hast seen the last;
Nay more, whole dramas pass before thine eyes,
Staged from the courts of kings of ancient name—
The cast alone is changed; the play's the same.

46

Depart not thou as if in anger forced,
But calmly with good will as thou hast lived;
Not as thy soul from out thy body rived,
But painlessly by kindly Death divorced;
For Nature gave thee these and made them one—
Now she unties the knot, and thou art gone!

47

Let neither flattery nor anger move,
Nor deem that indignation is the toll
Of courage; for the master of his soul
Is he that doth his strength in patience prove.
Victims of anger as of pain become
Alike if, wounded both, they both succumb.

48

When thou hast kissed thy child, then whisper thou
Within thy heart: "To-morrow thou wilt die!"
Nor think that in this speech ill omens lie.
The corn of yesterday is garnered now;
In Nature all things change, and what is Death
But as the change we make with every breath?

49

And now, Friend, thou hast been a citizen
In this great City; whether five or three
The years that pass, what matters it to thee?
The same Law runs for all; what hardship then?
No unjust judge revokes thy heritage
But kindly Nature bids thee quit the stage.

50

"My role's unfinished—I expected five
And but three acts are gone!" I hear thee say;
True; but in Life three acts are all the Play.
The Author wrote thy part and made thee live;
Depart at peace with all, and know that He
Thus bids thee go, and is at peace with thee.



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