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THE BOOK OF THE BOOK

Idries Shah

The value of the dwelling
is in the dweller.

Saying



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Preface

A LIONESS, ACCORDING to Aesop, was asked by some other animals how many cubs she produced at one birth.

She said:

‘One – but that one is a lion.’

Idries Shah

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The Dervish Who Became a King

There was once a dervish who had seen Truth.
He decided that he would have to become
powerful in the ordinary world before people
would listen to him, so he applied all his
concentration to the task of attaining visible
authority.

In the course of time he became a king.
When he had spent some time as a ruler, the
dervish realised that people did not want his
way of teaching.

They appeared to hear him, but acted only from
hope of reward or fear of punishment.

This dervish-king lacked an instrument with
which to teach.

None came to him until he was almost at the end
of his days.

The Stranger Dressed in Green

One day the ageing king, out on a hunting expedition, had sat down to rest when a stranger, dressed in green, approached. Saluting the king he told him a story, this story, The Tale of the Book.
The next Section begins the Tale of the Book.

Contrary to Expectation

A wise man, the wonder of his age, taught his disciples from a seemingly inexhaustible store of wisdom.

He attributed all his knowledge to a thick tome which was kept in a place of honour in his room.

The sage would allow nobody to open the volume. When he died, those who had surrounded him, regarding themselves as his heirs, ran to open the book, anxious to possess what it contained. They were surprised, confused and disappointed when they found that there was writing on only one page.

They became even more bewildered and then annoyed when they tried to penetrate the meaning of the phrase which met their eyes. It was: 'When you realise the difference between the container and the content, you will have knowledge.'

The Opinion of the Scholars

The successors to the sage took the book to the most famous scholars of the times, saying: 'We have this book, and seek your interpretation. It belonged to such-and-such a sage, the wonder of the age, now dead.

This is all he left behind, and we are unable to fathom its mystery.'

At first the scholars were delighted to see a work of such size, bearing the name of its former owner, whom they knew to have been revered by multitudes of people.

They said:

'We will of course give you the real interpretation.'

But when they found that the book was all but empty, and what words there were made no sense to them, they first sneered and then shouted at the students, driving them away in their fury.

They believed that they had been victims of a hoax.

That was a time when scholars were limited and literal-minded.

They could not imagine a book which could *do* something, only a book which *said* something.

The Interpretation of the Dervish

The dispirited students, going to rest in a caravanserai, came upon a dervish, and told him of their perplexity.

He said:

‘What did you learn from the scholars?’

The travellers said:

‘Nothing. They could tell us nothing.’

The dervish said:

‘On the contrary, they told you everything.

They showed that the book was not to be understood in the manner assumed by you, or by them.

You may think that they lack depth.

But you, in your turn, lack sense.

The book was teaching something through the incident itself, while you remained asleep.’

But the students found this explanation too subtle for their minds, and the only person who maintained the knowledge of the book was a casual visitor to the caravanserai, who overheard the interchange which I have just repeated to you, O King and Dervish!

The stranger dressed in green then stood up and walked away.

The Guarding and Theft of the Book

The king was so impressed by the stranger's story that he ordered the story to be inscribed and bound in a large book.

This was placed in a niche in his treasury and guarded by armed men, day and night.

The aged king died and a barbarian conqueror devastated his realm.

Breaking into the treasury, this man saw the book in its place of honour and said to himself: 'This must be the source of the country's happiness, wisdom and prosperity.'

He said aloud: 'Let the book be taken down and read out to me in our own language.'

But this conqueror, for all his physical power, was an ignoramus; he could make no sense from the words in the book.

Mali Saves the Book

The barbarian had the book destroyed, but his interpreter, whose name was Mali, remembered its contents.

It is through his work that its teaching was passed down. Mali opened a shop.

He kept copies of *The Book of the Book* on view, for sale.

Nobody was allowed to look inside until he had paid two gold pieces for a copy.

Some learned the lesson of the book, and came back to study with Mali.

Others wanted their money returned, but Mali always said:

‘I cannot give you back your money until you return me what you have learned from the transaction, as well as the book itself.’

Some who preferred mere appearance to inner content, called Mali a deceiver.

But Mali told them: ‘You were, all along, seeking deceivers, so you will assume that you have found one in anyone.’

Yasavi Buys It for Twelve Gold Pieces

When Ahmed Yasavi was a student, he bought a copy of The Book from Mali, paying two gold pieces.

The following day he returned, and gave Mali another ten pieces of gold, saying: ‘What I have learned from The Book is worth more than this. But since I have no more money I give it all to you, in token of my valuing this lesson as equal to my entire possessions.’

Yasavi of the Masters Transmits It

Yasavi had the history and the content of *The Book of the Book* bound in a volume of over two hundred pages, on whose cover was written:

‘If the thickness of books determines the value of their content, this one should assuredly be even thicker.’

Since Ahmed Yasavi, of the Masters of Central Asia, this story has been transmitted for more than seven hundred years.

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