The Simple Life

THE PROPHET Mohammed, who devoted his life to teaching the Arab people, cared not for ease or riches.

One night he slept on a hard mat, and when he awoke his skin bore the marks of the knots and fibres of his bed.

A friend said to him, “O Messenger of Allah! This bed was too hard for you, and if you had asked me I would joyfully have prepared a softer one, so that your rest might have been better.”

The Prophet replied, “A soft bed is not for me. I have a work to do in the world. When my body needs rest, I give it rest, but only as a horseman who ties his horse for a little while under the shade of a tree, to spare him from the heat of the sun, and soon sets off once more.”

“I have a work to do in the world,” said the Prophet. That is why his noble life was a simple one. Believing in his mission, he wanted to instruct the whole of Arabia. He did not care for luxuries: his heart was set on loftier thoughts.

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The following story from Arabia shows that to a healthy soul the simple life offers more happiness than any other.

Maisun was a daughter of the tribe of Kalb; she had spent her early years in tents in the desert.

One day, she was married to Caliph Muawiyah, but although he was rich and had many slaves, she was not happy with him; and in spite of all the luxury around her, she could find no peace of mind. Often when she was alone, she would sing softly to herself verses she had composed in Arabic:
Words of Long Ago

Brown garments of camel’s hair are fairer in my eyes
than the robes of a queen.
The desert tent is lovelier to dwell in than the grand
chambers of a palace.
The young colts that run about the Arab camp are
lovelier than the mules weighed down by their rich
trappings.
The voice of the watch-dog who barks at an approaching stranger sounds sweeter than the ivory horn of
the palace-guard.

Her song was heard by the Caliph and he banished her from his
court. So the poetess returned to her tribe, happy to see no more
of the rich dwelling that made her sad.

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In all countries, many people are beginning to understand that
a simple life is more desirable than a life of extravagance, vanity
and show.

There are more and more men and women who though
they can afford to buy costly things for themselves, feel that
their money can be put to a better use. They take a healthy diet
instead of rich foods, and prefer to decorate their homes with fur-
niture that is simple, strong and in good taste, rather than with
cumbersome, ornate and useless articles meant only for display.

In every age, the best and most energetic servitors of earth’s
progress have known how to lead a quiet and frugal life, which
keeps the body in good health and enables man to take a more
active part in working for the common good. Their example will
always put to shame all those who pile up useless treasures and
become slaves to their vast quantities of servants, clothes and
furniture.

You cannot make a heap without making a hole; and too
often the luxury of some represents the poverty of many others.
There are too many beautiful, great and useful things to be done in the world for those who are not wholly devoid of intelligence to be allowed to waste their time, money and thought in futile pastimes.

Saint Francis was an apostle of the Good Life. He did not teach in order to earn money. His life was simple and his greatest joy was to instruct the people by his example and his preaching. And he was content with whatever food he was given.

One day, as he and his companion, Brother Masseo, were passing through a town, Masseo went down one street while Francis took another. Masseo was tall and handsome, whereas the saint was short and plain-looking. People gave generously to Masseo, but Francis collected only very little.

When they met outside the gates of the town, they sat by a large stone on the bank of a clear stream that ran nearby, and put together the alms they had received.

“O Brother Masseo,” cried Saint Francis with a joyful face, “we are not worthy of so great a feast.”

“Indeed,” replied Masseo, “but what is there to call a feast in these few pieces of bread? We have no knife, no dishes, no cloth, no servant.”

“Is it not a feast,” replied the saint, “to have good bread on a good table when one is hungry, and fresh water from a limpid spring to drink when one is thirsty?”

This does not mean to say that poor people should always be resigned to their miserable fare. But in any case it shows how the contentment that comes from a noble life and the cheerfulness native to beautiful souls can make up for the absence of material possessions and outer riches.
One thing is certain, that a simple life has never harmed anyone, while the same cannot be said for luxury and over-abundance. Most often, the things which are of no use to men are also those which cause them harm.

In the reign of the famous Akbar, there lived at Agra a Jain saint named Banarasi Das. The Emperor summoned the saint to his palace and told him:

“Ask of me what you will, and because of your holy life, your wish shall be satisfied.”

“Parabrahman has given me more than I could wish for,” replied the saint.

“But ask all the same,” Akbar insisted.

“Then, Sire, I would ask that you do not call me again to your palace, for I want to devote my time to the divine work.”

“Let it be so,” said Akbar. “But I in my turn have a favour to ask you.”

“Speak, Sire.”

“Give me some good counsel that I may bear in mind and act upon.”

Banarasi Das thought for a moment and said:

“See that your food is pure and clean, and take good care, especially at night, over your meat and drink.”

“I will not forget your advice,” said the Emperor.

In truth the advice was good, for healthy food and drink make a healthy body, fit to be the temple of a pure mind and life.

But it so happened that the very day on which the saint visited the Emperor was a fast-day. And therefore Akbar would only have his meal several hours after midnight. The palace cooks had prepared the dishes in the evening and had placed them in plates of gold and silver, until the time of fasting should be over.

It was still dark when Akbar had them brought before him. Despite his haste to take some nourishment, he suddenly remembered the words of Banarasi Das: “Take care over your meat and
drink." So he examined the plate before him carefully and found that the food was covered with brown ants. In spite of all precautions, these ants had crept in and spoiled the Emperor’s meal.

Akbar had to send away the dishes, and this incident strongly impressed on his mind the useful advice he had received.

For you will understand that Banarasi Das had not intended to warn Akbar merely against brown ants, but against anything in his diet that might not be good for the health of his body or mind.

Many diseases come from an unhealthy diet.

One who knowingly sells unwholesome products is in fact making an attack on the lives of his fellow-citizens. And unwholesome products are not only those that are adulterated or spoilt but all those that may be in any way harmful to eat.

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The story does not tell us that Akbar found brown ants in his cup as well, and yet Banarasi Das advised him to be careful about his drink. For there are indeed cups which look bright to the eye and which seem to contain a pleasant and cheering drink but which are nevertheless full of danger for men. Foremost among them are those which contain alcohol.

The Prophet Mohammed taught that there was sin in wine and gambling; and therefore all who respect the words of the Koran abstain from wine and gambling to their profit.

But on the other hand there are many good people all over the world who find it right to take spirits. We respect their opinions. But these same people cannot assert that it is wrong not to take alcohol.

If, then, there are people who think that it is wrong to take fermented drinks, and others, on the contrary, who think that it is good, yet there is no one to maintain that it is wrong not to take any. It is also debatable whether or not it is useful to drink, but no one would dream of claiming that it is harmful not to do
so. And everyone would agree that in any case it is cheaper.

In every country there are societies for temperance or even total abstinence, whose members undertake not to touch spirits. And in certain towns it is even forbidden to sell them.

But in other places, the use of alcohol, formerly unknown, is spreading. In India, for example, where abstinence had reigned for so many centuries, alcohol has been introduced, more terrible than any demon in the ancient legends. For the terrible Rakshasas of which they speak could be harmful only to the body, whereas alcohol has even the power to kill thought and destroy character. So first of all it hurts the body. It hurts the children of parents who drink to excess. It hurts the intelligence of man and enslaves those who should be the servitors of humanity.

For every one of us should be a servant of humanity; and if by our food or our drink we weaken our minds or bodies, we are then only bad servants unable to perform their task.

What happens to the soldier when his weapon is broken, to the sailor when his ship has lost its masts, to the horseman when his horse is lamed? And what can a man do if he loses possession of his most precious faculties?

He no longer even has the worth of a good animal, for the animal at least avoids eating and drinking things that may harm it.

The Roman poet Virgil liked to live in the countryside. He admired the powerful bullock that draws the plough and cuts the furrow where the next harvest will spring up. Strong is his body, powerful his muscles and hard is his labour year in and year out.

And Virgil adds: “Wine and too much feasting are unknown to him. He feeds on grass, quenches his thirst from running rivers and crystal streams; and no care disturbs his peaceful slumber.”

Be temperate to be strong.

You would be offended if someone were to tell you, “Be weak.”
The Simple Life

Moderation increases the strength of the strong and preserves the strength of the weak.
Remember the advice of Banarasi Das:

*Take good care over the dish.*
*Take good care over the glass.*