

# ABU AL-ALA AL-MAARRI

THE LUZUMIYAT OF  
ABU'L-ALA

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**The Luzumiyat of Abu'l-Ala**

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The Luzumiyat of Abu'l-Ala / Abu al-Ala al-Maarri — «Public Domain»,

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# **The Luzumiyat of Abu'l-Ala / Select from his Luzum ma la Yalzam and Suct us-Zand**

## **TO ABU'L-ALA**

In thy fountained peristyles of Reason  
Glow the light and flame of desert noons;  
And in the cloister of thy pensive Fancy  
Wisdom burns the spikenard of her moons.

Closed by Fate the portals of the dwelling  
Of thy sight, the light thus inward flowed;  
And on the shoulders of the crouching Darkness  
Thou hast risen to the highest road.

I have seen thee walking with Canopus  
Through the stellar spaces of the night;  
I have heard thee asking thy Companion,  
“Where be now my staff, and where thy light?”

Abu'l-Ala, in the heaving darkness,  
Didst thou not the whisperings hear of me?  
In thy star-lit wilderness, my Brother,  
Didst thou not a burdened shadow see?

I have walked and I have slept beside thee,  
I have laughed and I have wept as well;  
I have heard the voices of thy silence  
Melting in thy Jannat and thy hell.

I remember, too, that once the Saki  
Filled the antique cup and gave it thee;  
Now, filled with the treasures of thy wisdom,  
Thou dost pass that very cup to me.

By the God of thee, my Syrian Brother,  
Which is best, the Saki's cup or thine?  
Which the mystery divine uncovers —  
If the cover covers aught divine.

And if it lies hid in the soul of silence  
Like incense in the dust of ambergris,  
Wouldst thou burn it to perfume the terror  
Of the caverns of the dried-up seas?

Where'er it be, Oh! let it be, my Brother. —  
Though "thrice-imprisoned,"<sup>1</sup> thou hast forged us more  
Solid weapons for the life-long battle  
Than all the Heaven-taught Armorers of yore.

"Thrice-imprisoned," thou wert e'en as mighty,  
In the boundless kingdom of the mind,  
As the whirlwind that compels the ocean,  
As the thunder that compels the wind.

"Thrice-imprisoned," thou wert freer truly  
Than the liegeless Arab on his mare, —  
Freer than the bearers of the sceptre, —  
Freer than the winged lords of the air.

"Thrice-imprisoned," thou hast sung of freedom  
As but a few of all her heroes can;  
Thou hast undermined the triple prison  
Of the mind and heart and soul of man.

In thy fountained peristyles of Reason  
Glow the light and flame of desert noons;  
And in the cloister of thy pensive Fancy  
Wisdom burns the spikenard of her moons.

*Ameen Rihani.*

## PREFACE

When Christendom was groping amid the superstitions of the Dark Ages, and the Norsemen were ravaging the western part of Europe, and the princes of Islam were cutting each other's throats in the name of Allah and his Prophet, Abu'l-Ala'l-Ma'arri was waging his bloodless war against the follies and evils of his age. He attacked the superstitions and false traditions of law and religion, proclaiming the supremacy of the mind; he hurled his trenchant invectives at the tyranny, the bigotry, and the quackery of his times, asserting the supremacy of the soul; he held the standard of reason high above that of authority, fighting to the end the battle of the human intellect. An intransigent with the exquisite mind of a sage and scholar, his weapons were never idle. But he was, above all, a poet; for when he stood before the eternal mystery of Life and Death, he sheathed his sword and murmured a prayer.

Abu'l-Ala'l-Ma'arri,<sup>2</sup> the Lucretius of Islam, the Voltaire of the East, was born in the spring of the year 973 A.D., in the obscure village of Ma'arrah,<sup>3</sup> which is about eighteen hours' journey south

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<sup>1</sup> In one of his poems he speaks of three prisons, his body being the third. Here is Professor Nicholson's translation: Methink I am thrice-imprisoned – ask not me Of news that need no telling — By loss of sight, confinement in my house, And this vile body for my spirit's dwelling.

<sup>2</sup> My learned friend, Count E. de Mulinen, called my attention to the work of Von Kremer on Abu'l-Ala. And I have seen copies of a certain German Asiatic Review in which were published translations, made by that eminent Orientalist, of many poems from the Luzumiyat. He speaks of Abu'l-Ala as one of the greatest moralists of all times, whose profound genius anticipated much that is commonly attributed to the so-called modern spirit of enlightenment. Professor D. S. Margoliouth has also translated into English the

of Halab (Aleppo). And instead of Ahmad ibn Abdallah ibn Sulaiman ut-Tanukhi (of the tribe of Tanukh), he was called Abu'l-Ala (the Father of the Sublime), by which patronymic of distinction he is popularly known throughout the Arabic speaking world.

When a boy, Abu'l-Ala was instructed by his father; and subsequently he was sent to Halab, where he pursued his studies under the tutelage of the grammarian Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn us-Sad. His literary proclivity was evinced in his boyhood, and he wrote verse, we are told, before he was ten. Of these juvenile pieces, however, nothing was preserved.

He was about five years old when he fell a victim to small-pox and almost lost his sight from it. But a weakness in his eyes continued to trouble him and he became, in middle age, I presume, totally blind.<sup>4</sup> Some of his biographers would have us believe he was born blind; others state that he completely lost his sight when he was attacked by the virulent disease; and a few intimate that he could see slightly at least with the right eye. As to whether or not he was blind when he was sent to Halab to pursue his studies, his biographers do not agree. My theory, based on the careful perusal of his poems and on a statement advanced by one of his biographers,<sup>5</sup> is that he lost his sight gradually, and total blindness must have come upon him either in his youth or his middle age.<sup>6</sup> Were we to believe that he was born blind or that he suffered the complete loss of his sight in his boyhood, we should be at a loss to know, not how he wrote his books, for that was done by dictation; not how he taught his pupils, for that was done by lectures; but how he himself was taught in the absence in those days of a regular system of instruction for the blind.

In 1010 A.D. he visited Baghdad, the centre of learning and intelligence and the capital of the Abbaside Khalifs, where he passed about two years and became acquainted with most of the literary men of the age.<sup>7</sup> He attended the lectures and the readings of the leading doctors and grammarians, meeting with a civil reception at the hand of most of them.

He also journeyed to Tripoli,<sup>8</sup> which boasted, in those days, of many public libraries; and, stopping at Ladhekiyah, he lodged in a monastery where he met and befriended a very learned monk.

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Letters of Abu'l-Ala, which were published with the Arabic Text at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898. Also Professor Raynold A. Nicholson, in his work, "A Literary History of the Arabs," discusses the poet at length and renders into English some poems from the Luzumiyat. A work was published by Charles Carrington, Paris, 1904, under the title, "Un Précurseur d'Omar Khayyam, Le Poète Aveugle: Extraits de Poèmes et de Lettres d'Abu'l-Ala al-Ma'arri." And another, "The Diwan of Abu'l-Ala," done into English by Henry Baerlein, who must have helped himself freely to the Quatrains of Von Kremer.

<sup>3</sup> For a picturesque description of the squalidness and sordidness of Ma'arra and its people, see Letter XX of "The Letters of Abu'l-Ala," Oxford Edition.

<sup>4</sup> When he visited Baghdad he was about thirty-seven years of age. And when he went to attend a lecture there by one of the leading scholars, he was called by the lecturer, *istabl*, which is Syrian slang for blind.

<sup>5</sup> "He was four years of age when he had the attack of small-pox. The sight of his left eye was entirely lost and the eyeball of his right had turned white. Al-Hafiz us-Silafi relates: 'Abu Muhammad Abdallah told me that he visited him (Abu'l-Ala) once with his uncle and found him sitting on an old hair matting. He was very old, and the disease that attacked him in his boyhood had left its deep traces on his emaciated face. He bade me come near him and blessed me as he placed his hand on my head. I was a boy then, and I can picture him before me now. I looked into his eyes and remarked how the one was horribly protruding, and the other, buried in its socket, could barely be seen.'" – Ibn Khillikan.

<sup>6</sup> "How long he retained any sort of vision is not certain. His frequent references in his writings to stars, flowers, and the forms of the Arabic letters imply that he could see a little at least some years after this calamity." – D. S. Margoliouth: The Letters of Abu'l-Ala. "He used to play chess and *nard*." – Safadi.

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting account of Literary Society in Baghdad see Renan's "Islam and Science"; also the Biography to the Letters of Abu'l-Ala. Prof. Margoliouth, though not unfair in his judgment of the poet, is unnecessarily captious at times. He would seem partial to the suffrage of orthodox Mohammedans with regard to Abu'l-Ala's unorthodox religious views. But they have a reason, these ulama, for endeavoring to keep a genius like Abu'l-Ala within the pale of belief. Which reason, let us hope, has no claim on Prof. Margoliouth. And in his attempt to depreciate Abu'l-Ala as a disinterested and independent scholar and poet, he does not escape the inconsistency which often follows in the wake of cavil. Read this, for instance: "Like many of those who have failed to secure material prosperity, he found comfort in a system which flatters the vanity of those who have not succeeded by teaching that success is not worth attaining." And this, not on the same page perhaps, but close to it: "For though other roads towards obtaining the means of supporting himself at Baghdad have been open to him, *that which he refused to follow* (the profession of an encomiast, *i. e.* a sycophant, a toady) was the most certain."

<sup>8</sup> Biography of Abu'l-Ala by Adh-Dhahabi.

They discussed theology and metaphysics, digressing now and then into the profane. Indeed, the skepticism which permeates Abu'l-Ala's writings must have been nursed in that convent by both the monk and the poet.

These are virtually the only data extant showing the various sources of Abu'l-Ala's learning; but to one endowed with a keen perception, a powerful intellect, a prodigious memory, together with strong innate literary predilections, they seem sufficient. He was especially noted for the extraordinary memory he possessed; and around this our Arab biographers and historians weave a thick net of anecdotes, or rather fables. I have no doubt that one with such a prodigious memory could retain in a few minutes what the average person could not; but when we are told that Abu'l-Ala once heard one of his pupils speaking with a friend in a foreign tongue, and repeated there and then the long conversation, word for word, without having the slightest idea of its meaning, we are disposed to be skeptical. Many such anecdotes are recorded and quoted by his Arab biographers without as much as intimating a single doubt.<sup>9</sup> The fact that he was blind partly explains the abnormal development of his memory.

His career as poet and scholar dates from the time he returned from Baghdad. This, so far as is known, was the last journey he made; and his home became henceforth his earthly prison. He calls himself "A double-fettered Captive,"<sup>9</sup> his solitude being the one and his blindness the other. Like most of the scholars of his age, in the absence of regular educational institutions, with perhaps one or two exceptions, he had to devote a part of his time to the large number of pupils that flocked to Ma'arraḥ from all parts of Asia Minor, Arabia, and India. Aside from this, he dictated to his numerous amanuenses on every possible and known subject. He is not only a poet of the first rank, but an essayist, a literary critic, and a mathematician as well. Everything he wrote was transcribed by many of his admirers, as was the fashion then, and thus circulated far and near. Nothing, however, was preserved but his Diwans, his Letters and the Epistle of Forgiveness,<sup>10</sup> of which I shall yet have occasion to speak.<sup>11</sup>

His reputation as poet and scholar had now, after his return from Baghdad, overleaped the horizons, as one writer has it. Honors were conferred upon him successively by the rulers and the scholars of his age. His many noted admirers were in constant communication with him. He was now looked upon as "the master of the learned, the chief of the wise, and the sole monarch of the bards of his century." Ma'arraḥ<sup>12</sup> became the Mecca of every literary aspirant; ambitious young scholars came there for enlightenment and inspiration. And Abu'l-Ala, although a pessimist, received them with his wonted kindness and courtesy. He imparted to them what he knew, and told them candidly what he would not teach, since, unlike other philosophers, he was not able to grasp the truth, nor compass the smallest of the mysteries of creation. In his latter days, youthful admirers sought his blessing, which he, as the childless father of all, graciously conferred, but with no self-assumed spiritual or temporal authority.

For thirty years he remained a vegetarian, living the life of an ascetic.<sup>13</sup> This mode of living led his enemies to accuse him of renouncing Islam and embracing Brahminism, one of the tenets of which forbids the slaughter of animals. The accusation was rather sustained by the dispassionate

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<sup>9</sup> "The Letters, which abound in quotations, enable us to gauge the power of his memory better than these wonder-loving narrators." – D. S. Margoliouth.

<sup>10</sup> Also his Commentary on the works of the poet Al-Mutanabbi.

<sup>11</sup> Adh-Dhahabi gives the titles of forty-eight of his works, to which Safadi adds fourteen. A literary baggage of considerable bulk, had not most of it perished when the Crusaders took Ma'arraḥ in 1098. Now, the Luzumiyat, the Letters, Suct uz-Zand and the Epistle of Forgiveness can be obtained in printed form.

<sup>12</sup> "What he says of Al-Maghribi in the First Letter became literally true of himself: 'As Sinai derives its fame from Moses and the Stone from Abraham, so Ma'arraḥ is from this time (after his return from Baghdad) known by him.'" – D. S. Margoliouth.

<sup>13</sup> Even before he visited Baghdad he had a pension of thirty dinars (about \$100), half of which he paid to his servant, and the other half was sufficient to secure for him the necessities of life. "He lived on lentils and figs," says Adh-Dhahabi; "he slept on a felt mattress; he wore nothing but cotton garments; and his dwelling was furnished with a straw matting."



attitude he held towards it, and, furthermore, by his vehement denunciation of the barbarous practice of killing animals for food or for sport.

Most of the censors of Abu'l-Ala were either spurred to their task by bigotry or animated by jealousy and ignorance. They held him up to ridicule and opprobrium, and such epithets as heretic, atheist, renegade, etc., were freely applied. But he was supremely indifferent to them all,<sup>14</sup> and never would he cross swords with any particular individual; he attacked the false doctrines they were teaching, turning a deaf ear to the virulent vituperations they hurled upon him. I fail to find in the three volumes of his poems, even in the Letters, one acrimonious line savoring of personality.

Ibn-Khillikan, The Plutarch of Arabia, who is cautious and guarded in his statements, speaking of Abu'l-Ala, truly says:

“His asceticism, his deep sense of right and wrong, his powerful intellect, his prodigious memory, and his wide range of learning, are alike acknowledged by both friend and foe.”

His pessimism was natural, in part hereditary. The man was nothing if not genuine and sincere. Ruthlessly he said what he thought and felt. He had no secrets to hide from the world, no thoughts which he dared not express. His soul was as open as Nature; his mind was the polished mirror of his age.<sup>15</sup> It may be that had he not been blind-stricken and had not small-pox disfigured his features, he might have found a palliative in human society. His pessimism might not have been cured, but it might have been rendered at least enticing. Good-fellowship might have robbed it of its sting. Nor is his strong aversion to marriage, in view of these facts, surprising.

He lived to know that “his fame spread from the sequestered village of Ma'arrah to the utmost confines of the Arabic speaking world.” In the spring of 1055 A.D. he died, and was buried in a garden surrounding his home. Adh-Dhahabi states that there were present at his grave eighty poets, and that the Koran was read there two hundred times in a fortnight. Eighty poets in the small town of Ma'arrah sounds incredible. But we must bear in mind that almost every one who studies the Arabic grammar has also to study prosody and versification and thus become at least a rhymster. Even to-day, the death of a noted person among the Arabs, is always an occasion for the display of much eloquence and tears, both in prose and verse.

Abu'l-Ala, beside being a poet and scholar of the first rank, was also one of the foremost thinkers of his age. Very little is said of his teachings, his characteristics, his many-sided intellect, in the biographies I have read. The fact that he was a liberal thinker, a trenchant writer, – free, candid, downright, independent, skeptical withal, – answers for the neglect on the part of Mohammedan doctors, who, when they do discuss him, try to conceal from the world what his poems unquestionably reveal. I am speaking, of course, of the neglect after his death. For during his life-time he was much honored, as I have shown, and many distinguished travellers came especially to Ma'arrah to see him. He was also often called upon to act as intercessor with the Emirs for the natives of his village.<sup>16</sup>

The larger collection of his poems, the *Luzumiyat*,<sup>17</sup> was published in Cairo, in two volumes, by Azeez Zind, from an original Ms. written in the twelfth century, under Abu'l-Ala's own title *Luzum ma la Yalzam*, or the Necessity of what is Unnecessary. This title refers to the special system of

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<sup>14</sup> We have the following from Adh-Dhahabi: “One of these critics came one day to Abu'l-Ala and relating the conversation himself said, ‘What is it that is quoted and said about you?’ I asked, ‘It is false; they are jealous of me,’ he replied. ‘And what have you to incite their jealousy? You have left for them both this world and the other.’” And the other? murmured the poet, questioning, ruminating. ‘And the other, too?’”

<sup>15</sup> “His poems, generally known as the *Luzumiyat*, arrest attention by their boldness and originality as well as by the sombre and earnest tone which pervades them.” – Raynold A. Nicholson: *A Literary History of the Arabs*.

<sup>16</sup> The Governor of Halab, Salih ibn Mirdas, passed once by Ma'arrah, when thirty of its distinguished citizens were imprisoned on account of a riot in the town the previous year. Abu'l-Ala being asked to intercede for them, was led to Salih, who received him most politely and asked him what he desired. The poet, in eloquent but unflattering speech, asked Salih ‘to take and give forgiveness.’ And the Governor, not displeased, replied: ‘I grant it you.’ Whereupon the prisoners were released.

<sup>17</sup> “His poems leave no aspect of the age (in which he lived) untouched, and present a vivid picture of degeneracy and corruption, in which tyrannous rulers, venal judges, hypocritical and unscrupulous theologians, swindling astrologers, roving swarms of dervishes and godless Carmathians, occupy a prominent place.” – Raynold A. Nicholson: *A Literary History of the Arabs*.

rhyming which the poet adopted. And the poems, published in desultory fashion, were written, it seems, at different periods of his life, and are arranged according to his particular alphabetical system of rhyming. They bear no titles except, "And he also says, rhyming with so and so," whatever the consonant and vowel may be. In his Preface to the Luzumiyat he says:

"It happened that I composed these poems during the past years, and in them I have always aimed at the truth. They are certainly free from the blandishments of exaggeration. And while some of them are written in glorification of God, who is above such glory, others are, as it were, a reminder to those who forget, a pinch to those who sleep, and a warning to the children of the earth against the wiles of the great world, where human rights and human gratitude are often strangled by the same hand of Fate."

As for the translation of these chosen quatrains, let me say at the outset that it is almost impossible to adhere to the letter thereof and convey the meaning without being insipid, dull, and at times even ridiculous. There being no affinity between the Arabic and the English, their standards of art and beauty widely differ, and in the process of transformation the outer garment at times must necessarily be doffed. I have always adhered to the spirit, however, preserving the native imagery where it was not too clannish or grotesque. I have added nothing that was foreign to the ruling idea, nor have I omitted anything that was necessary to the completion of the general thought. One might get an idea of what is called a scholarly translation from the works of any of the Orientalists who have made a study of Abu'l-Ala. The first English scholar to mention the poet, as far as I know, was J. D. Carlisle, who in his "Specimens of Arabic Poetry", published in 1810, has paraphrased in verse a quatrain on Pride and Virtue. He also translated into Latin one of Abu'l-Ala's bold epigrams, fearing, I suppose, to publish it at that time in English.

The quatrains which are here published are culled from the three Volumes of his poems, and they are arranged, as nearly as may be, in the logical order of their sequence of thought. They form a kind of eclogue, which the poet-philosopher delivers from his prison in Ma'arrah.

Once, in Damascus, I visited, with some friends, a distinguished Sufi; and when the tea was being served, our host held forth on the subject of Abu'l-Ala's creed. He quoted from the Luzumiyat to show that the poet-philosopher of Ma'arrah was a true Sufi, and of the highest order. "In his passionate hatred of the vile world and all the vile material manifestations of life," quoth our host, "he was like a dervish dancing in sheer bewilderment; a holy man, indeed, melting in tears before the distorted image of Divinity. In his aloofness, as in the purity of his spirit, the ecstatic negations of Abu'l-Ala can only be translated in terms of the Sufi's creed. In his raptures, *shathat*, he was as distant as Ibn ul-Arabi; and in his bewilderment, *heirat*

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