

*Title*

# **THE BUSTAN OF SADI**

Translated from the Persian  
with an Introduction

by  
**A. Hart Edwards**

Bird Publisher, 2013

### *About this eBook*

This is a prose translation of the Bustan of Sadi, originally published as part of the Wisdom of the East series in the early 20th century, and long out of print. This little book is full of practical spiritual wisdom. Sadi doesn't lean on allegory as much as other Sufi writers of the period; most of the stories in this collection have a pretty obvious moral lesson.

Born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1184, Sadi (pseudonym of Muslih-ud-Din Mushrif ibn Abdullah) is considered one of the major medieval Persian poets. He traveled widely, through regions of what is today Syria, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. Vignettes of gritty caravan and street scenes give life to his tales. In old age he returned to Shiraz, and composed his two best-known works, the poetic Bustan, or Orchard (in 1257), and the prose Gulistan, the Rose Garden (in 1258). He died in 1283 or possibly 1291.

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### ***Introduction***

If among the twenty-two works with which Sadi enriched the literature of his country the Gulistan rank first in popularity, the Bustan (lit. "Garden") may justly claim equal precedence in point of interest and merit.

No comprehensive translation of this important classical work has hitherto been placed before the reading public, but it cannot be doubted that the character of its contents is such as to fully justify the attempt now made to familiarize English readers with the entertaining anecdotes and devotional wisdom which the Sage of Shiraz embodied in his Palace of Wealth. This is the name which he applies to the Bustan in an introductory chapter, and it is one which springs from something more than a poet's fancy, for the ten doors, or chapters, with which the edifice is furnished lead into a garden that is indeed rich in the fruits of knowledge gained by a wide experience of life in many lands, and earnest thought.

The Bustan is written in verse - a fact which adds considerably to the difficulties of translation, since the invariable rule of Sadi, like that of every other Persian poet we have read, is to sacrifice sense to the exigencies of rhyme and metre. In not a few cases the meaning is so confused on this account that even the native commentators, who possess a fund of ingenuity in explaining what they do not properly understand, have been compelled to pass over numerous couplets through sheer inability to unravel their intricacies and the abstruse ideas of the poet.

Probably in no other language in the world is poetic license so freely permitted and indulged in as in Persian. The construction of sentences follows no rule; the order of words is just that which the individual poet chooses to adopt, and the idea of time - past, present, and future - is ignored in the use of tenses, that part of a verb being alone employed which rhymes the best.

Notwithstanding idiosyncrasies of this kind the Bustan is written in a style that is delightfully pure and admirably adapted to the subject. The devout spirit by which Sadi was characterized throughout his chequered life is revealed in every page of the book. In the Gulistan he gave free rein to the quaint humour which for many centuries has been the delight of the Eastern peoples, and which an ever-increasing body of English readers is learning to appreciate and admire. In the Bustan the humour is more restrained; its place is taken by a more sober reasoning of the duties of mankind towards the Deity and towards their fellow-men. Devotion to God and the inflexibility of Fate are the underlying texts of every poem, and the ideality of the one and the stern reality of the other are portrayed in language the beauty of which, it is to be feared, the English rendering does not always adequately convey.

The poems abound in metaphor, a figure of style which Eastern writers employ to a degree that is always exaggerated, and sometimes tedious; but for the purpose of this translation, which aims at a happy medium between literal accuracy and the freedom requisite in order to render Oriental phraseology into polite English, numerous of the more far-fetched allusions have been discarded, to the benefit of the text.

Although a memoir of Sadi's life is included in another volume of this series, it may not be out of place to give here a brief outline of the poet's career, especially as the Bustan contains several references to his childhood and travels.



Sheikh Muslih-ud-din Sadi was born in Shiraz, in Persia, A.D. 1175; that is to say, 571 years after the flight of Muhammad from Mecca to Madina. He was the son of one Abdu'llah (servant of God), who held a Government office under the Diwan of that time. Sadi was a child when his father died, as is made clear from the pathetic poem in the second chapter, ending with these words:

*Well do I know the orphan's sorrow,  
For my father departed in my childhood.*

But poorly endowed with earthly riches, Sadi endured many hardships in consequence of this bereavement, and was eventually obliged to live, together with his mother, under the protection of a Saracen chief. How long he remained there it is impossible to say, for the reason that his biographers are the reverse of informing. This much is, however, known, that being imbued from early childhood with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, he eventually journeyed to Baghdad, then at the zenith of its intellectual fame, and was enabled to enter a private school there through the generosity of a wealthy native gentleman. Making full use of the opportunity so favourably presented, the young aspirant progressed rapidly along the path of learning, and at the age of twenty-one made his first essays in authorship. Some fragmentary poems which he submitted with a long dedication to Shams-ud-din, the Professor of Literature at the Nizamiah College of Baghdad, so pleased that able and discerning man that he at once fixed upon Sadi a liberal allowance from his own private purse, with the promise of every further assistance in his power. Soon after this, Sadi was admitted into the college, and ultimately gained an Idrar, or fellowship. In the seventh chapter of the Bustan he narrates an instructive story reminiscent of his studies at Nizamiah, and, prone to conceit though he often is, he tells the story against himself.

His scholastic life did not terminate until he had reached the age of thirty. Of the value of this prolonged period of study he himself was fully cognisant. Dost thou not know," Sadi he asks in the seventh chapter, how Sadi attained to rank? Neither did he traverse the plains nor journey across seas. he In his youth he lived under the yoke of the wise: God granted him distinction in after-life. And it is not long before he who is submissive in obedience exercises command." No better example of the truth of this passage could be cited than that afforded by his own case.

On leaving Baghdad, he went in company with his tutor, Abdul Qadir Gilani, on a pilgrimage to Mecca. This was the first of many travels extending over a period of thirty years, in the course of which he visited Europe, India, and practically every part of what are known as the Near and Middle East. A trip through Syria and Turkey is specifically mentioned in this book as inspiring the composition of the Bustan. Not wishing, as he tells us, to return empty-handed to his friends at Shiraz, he built the Palace of Wealth, and offered it to them as a gift. He does not conceal the high opinion which he himself placed upon this product of his gifted pen. The gracefully worded phrases with which he predicted the undying popularity of the Gulistan finds a parallel in the dedication of the Bustan to Atabak Abu Bakr-bin-Sad, the illustrious monarch of Persia beneath whose protection Sadi spent the latter half of his life.

"Although not wishing to sing the praises of kings," he writes, "I have dedicated this book to one so that perhaps the pious will say that Sadi, who surpassed all in eloquence, lived in the time of Abu Bakr Sad." Then, addressing the king, he adds: "Happy is thy fortune that Sadi's date coincides with thine, for as long as the moon and sun are in the skies thy memory will

remain eternal in this book." This conceit is pardonable, since it has been amply justified by time.

After the thirty years of travel, Sadi, becoming elderly, settled down in Persia, where, as has been said, he gained the favour of the ruling prince, from whom he derived not only the dignity and the more tangible advantages of the post of Poet-Laureate, but his takhallus, or titular name, of Sadi. He died at the ripe age of 116, and was buried in his native city.

If the Bustan were the only monument that remained of his genius, his name would assuredly still be inscribed in the roll of the Immortals. One feature of his great intellectual faculties needs to be emphasized, and all the more so because it is apt to be overlooked. That is the increasing power which they assumed as he advanced in years, the truth of which can be understood when it is stated that he composed the Bustan at the age of 82, the Gulistan appearing twelve months later. Few, if any, instances of such sustained mental activity are to be found elsewhere in the entire world's history of letters.

Under the several headings of the various chapters a wide range of ethical subjects is discussed, the whole forming a compendium of moral philosophy the broad principles of which must remain for all time as irrefutable as the precepts of Scriptural teaching.

Sadi's spiritual message is not that of a visionary. His religion was an eminently practical one - he had no sympathies with the recluse and the ascetic. To fulfil one's duties towards one's fellow-men is to fulfil one's duty towards the Deity. That is the root-idea of his teachings. "Religion," he observes, "consists only in the service of the people: it does not lie in the rosary, or prayer-rug, or mendicant's habit."

This couplet, occurring in the opening chapter, is put into the mouth of a certain pious man whom one of the kings of Persia is said to have visited in a repentant mood for the purpose of seeking counsel. The story, like many others in the book, may or may not have any foundation in fact, "the histories of ancient kings," which the poet frequently quotes as his authority, being rather too vague to be convincing. At the same time, the historical allusions form an interesting and instructive background to the legends and the moral precepts so abundantly interwoven among them.

Although Persia is only yet in the process of readjusting her ideas of government and the prerogatives of rulers, principles more advanced than seem compatible with despotism have been for many centuries current among her people, in theory, at least, if not in practice. Muhammad said that a little practice with much knowledge was better than much practice with little knowledge. On that ground Persia has defence, for the knowledge certainly was there. What could better describe the true relationship between king and people than Sadi's thirteenth-century epigram? -

*Subjects are as the root and the king is as the tree,  
And the tree, O son, gains strength from the root.*

In 1910 the autocratic tree at Teheran was rudely severed from its root; perchance the successors of Abu Bakr were not of those to whom "the words of Sadi are agreeable."

The saving grace of benevolence is illustrated in the second chapter by means of some entertaining anecdotes, of two of which the hero is Hatim Tai, the famous Arabian chief,

whose generosity was such that he preferred to die rather than disappoint the messenger sent by a jealous king to slay him. The story of the Darwesh and the Fox is noteworthy inasmuch as it throws a much-needed light upon the Eastern interpretation of all that is implied by "qismat." It is commonly supposed that the sense of inevitability removes from the Eastern's mind the necessity for individual effort. This view is distinctly erroneous. No such pernicious doctrine is, at any rate, subscribed to by the educated classes; to the lazy and ne'er-do-well who plead Fate as their excuse, Sadi points the moral.

After demonstrating in the two succeeding chapters the powerlessness of man to avert the decrees of Fate, and the virtues of contentment, the poet passes on to discuss the cultivation of the mind. The comparison here drawn between the human mind and a city "full of good and evil desires," of which the Ego is the Sultan and Reason the Vazier, is original and full of meaning. Despite his own much-vaunted eloquence and facility of speech, Sadi condemns in scathing terms the man of many words, remarking poignantly that "a grain of musk is better than a heap of mud." So, too, in his opinion, is a thief better than a backbiter, and, apropos of the gentler sex, a woman of good nature better than one of beauty. The advice to take a new wife every year cannot be regarded seriously, even though it be true that last year's almanac has lost its usefulness. More worthy of the poet is the discourse on the training of children. Nothing truer than the sentiments expressed in this poem did he ever utter, and in England today there can be few who would dispute them.

Excessive charm pervades the three concluding chapters. If that bigotry and spirit of intolerance of which the Mussulman, no less than the followers of other creeds, is guilty is revealed in no small measure, criticism on that score must give place to wonder and admiration for the sincere and fervid homage which the poet renders to the Deity whom, in the essence, all nations worship.

The narrative, in the eighth chapter, of Sadi's adventure with the idolaters in Guzerat will be found amusing as well as enlightening.

Nothing now remains for the translator but to join with Sadi in his plea for indulgent criticism:

*Never have I heard it said  
The wise found fault with what they read,  
Though of Chinese cloth a robe be made,  
Inside must a cotton lining be laid.  
If thou wouldst but the cloth, seek not to condemn -  
Gloss over the cotton with acumen.  
On the Day of Judgment the wicked will be  
Forgiven, through them that have purity.  
If in my words thou evil find,  
Do likewise, forgive, for more is behind.  
If a word in a thousand suit thy taste,  
Do not denounce the rest in haste.*

The poet goes on to remark that his compositions are esteemed in Persia as is the choicest musk of Tartary: the translator is less fortunate and more modest.

A. Hart Edwards

***1. In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful***

In the name of Him Who created and sustains the world, the Sage Who endowed tongue with speech.

He attains no honour who turns the face from the door of His mercy.

The kings of the earth prostrate themselves before Him in supplication.

He seizes not in haste the disobedient, nor drives away the penitent with violence. The two worlds are as a drop of water in the ocean of His knowledge.

He withholds not His bounty though His servants sin; upon the surface of the earth liar He spread a feast, in which both friend and foe may share.

Peerless He is, and His kingdom is eternal. Upon the head of one He placeth a crown; another he hurleth from the throne to the ground.

The fire of His friend He turneth into a flowergarden; through the waters of the Nile He sendeth His foes to perdition.

Behind the veil He seeth all, and concealeth our faults with His own goodness.

He is near to them that are downcast, and accepteth the prayers of them that lament.

He knoweth of the things that exist not, of secrets that are untold.

He causeth the moon and the sun to revolve, and spreadeth water upon the earth.

In the heart of a stone hath He placed a jewel; from nothing hath He created all that is.

Who can reveal the secret of His qualities; what eye can see the limits of His beauty?

The bird of thought cannot soar to the height of His presence, nor the hand of understanding reach to the skirt of His praise.

Think not, O Sadi, that one can walk in the road of purity except in the footsteps of Muhammad.

He is the patriarch of the prophets, the guide of the path of salvation; the mediator of mankind, and the chief of the Court of Judgment. What of thy praises can Sadi utter? The mercy of God be upon thee, O Prophet, and peace!

***2. On the Reason for the Writing of the Book***

I travelled in many regions of the globe and passed the days in the company of many men. I reaped advantages in every corner, and gleaned an ear of corn from every harvest. But I saw none like the pious and devout men of Shiraz - upon which land be the grace of God - my attachment with whom drew away my heart from Syria and Turkey.

I regretted that I should go from the garden of the world empty-handed to my friends, and reflected: "Travellers bring sugar-candy from Egypt as a present to their friends. Although I have no candy, yet have I words that are sweeter. The sugar that I bring is not that which is eaten, but what knowers of truth take away with respect."

When I built this Palace of Wealth,<sup>1</sup> I furnished it with ten doors of instruction.<sup>2</sup>

It was in the year 655 that this famous treasury became full of the pearls of eloquence. A quilted robe of silk, or of Chinese embroidery, must of necessity be padded with cotton; if thou obtain aught of the silk, fret not - be generous and conceal the cotton. I have heard that in the day of Hope and Fear the Merciful One will pardon the evil for the sake of the good. If thou see evil in my words, do thou likewise. If one couplet among a thousand please thee, generously withhold thy faultfinding.

Assuredly, my compositions are esteemed in Persia as the priceless musk of Khutan. Sadi brings roses to the garden with mirth. His verses are like dates encrusted with sugar - when opened, a stone<sup>3</sup> is revealed inside.

### ***3. Concerning Atabak Abu Bakr, Son of Sad<sup>4</sup>***

Although not desiring to write in praise of kings, I have inscribed this book to the name of a certain one so that perhaps the pious may say: Sadi, who surpassed all in eloquence, lived in the time of Abu Bakr, the son of Sad." Thus, in this book will his memory remain so long as the moon and sun are in the skies. Beyond count are his virtues - may the world fulfil his desires, the heavens be his friend, and the Creator be his guardian.

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. the Bustan.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. its ten chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Lit. "bone"; used metaphorically in the sense of "a truth."

<sup>4</sup> One of the kings of Persia in whose reign Sadi flourished. His full name was Atabak Muzaffar-ud-Din Abu Bakr-bin-Sa'd-bin-Zangi.