

Eastern Wisdom

THIS *Wisdom of the East Series*,* in handy little volumes, is a good thing. It is always a good thing to help along the mutual comprehension of diverse races, and that is what the editors say they intend. The better you know a man or a race the better you like him, and to understand something of the mental and social attitudes of other races, their aspirations and their religious emotions, always makes for this good end. Therefore our thanks to the editors, who bring a little closer the dream of a war-less world. Naturally the series has ups and downs, the selections and the men chosen to write introductions to them are not equally good, more's the pity, for some are excellent. There is "The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep and the Instruction of Ke'Gemni: the Oldest Books in the World," written about 3550 and 3998 B. C., respectively, and a most interesting commentary upon the high grade of civilization, the social wisdom and the sense of justice in ancient Egypt. "The Duties of the Heart," by Bachye, a Jewish rabbi of Spain, and "The Wisdom of Israel," being extracts from the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah, are amplifications and illustrations of Jewish teaching of an impressive sort. There is a volume of selections from the Koran, with an introduction outlining the principles of Moslem faith, but the volumes on Sa'di and Abu'l-Ala are far more interesting. Sa'di's "Scroll of Wisdom" is a collection of moral essays illuminating the Persian sentiments of the period, but much more pithy is the "Rose Garden of Sa'di," which holds many such keen penetrations thru the husk to the kernel as when he cries to the derwishes of his day:

"Thou hast no need to wear the cowl of pelt;
Be thou true Derwish in a Tartar pelt."

Sa'di was born at the close of the twelfth century, but two centuries earlier, and forty years before the birth of the famous Omar Khayyam, there was born the Syrian philosopher and—what shall we call him?—agnostic, Abu'l-Ala. Hen-

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ry Baerlein has turned his quatrains into English with a singular success that inevitably challenges comparison with the work of Fitzgerald, and by no means always suffers. He has given us, too, a most suggestive analysis of the poet's attitude toward the inscrutable problems of life. Here are some of the quatrains:

Lo! there are many ways and many traps
And many guides, and which of them is
lord?

For verily Mahomet has the sword,
And he may have the truth—perhaps! perhaps!

Now this religion happens to prevail
Until by that one it is overthrown—
Because men dare not live with men alone,
But always with another fairy-tale.

There is profound wisdom in that reflection on religion's part in society. How strikingly the dreary sorrow of life is caught in the lines:

My faith it is that all the wanton pack
Of living shall be—hush, poor heart!—withdrawn,

As even to the camel comes a dawn
Without a burden for his wounded back.

And finally the burden of making heaven or hell is thrust back on the individual when he cries:

"There is no God save Allah!"—that is true,
Nor is there any prophet save in mind
Of man who wanders through the dark to
find

The Paradise that is in me or you.

There is a volume giving the classical book of instruction for Japanese women, that manual of utter self-abnegation that not only works such strange results in the mothers and wives of Nippon, but finds its fruitage, too, in the willing sacrifice of the whole people to the Mikado's call. As for China, no study of the empire can be worth while that does not begin and end in a careful familiarity with the spirit of Confucius and the immeasurable influence of his social philosophy. Unfortunately, the volume called "The Conduct of Life" is too condensed for the best service. Less directly influential, but loftier, it may be, in significance are the teachings of the ancient mystic, Lao Tse, and in their idealistic philosophy, in their broad charity and their moral intensity they place themselves beside the finest thought of Greece. The volume has an excellent introduction. To put into handy form the words of these two men, conservors of the most stable em-

pire the world knows today, is a work for which the editors of the series are to be thanked. It is a pity that more people of the West cannot familiarize themselves with these representative teachings of the Orient until the pettiness of racial antipathies fall away in the consciousness of the unity of human aspiration.