

## Translator's Notes

### [About the Author of the Letter](#)

In the World such persons are rarely found in whom besides one or two virtuous qualities other qualities might also attain prominence, much less the convergence of all contradictory qualities, because every temperament is not suited for the development of every quality, each quality has a peculiar tempo and each virtue needs a particular climate, and they are appropriate only for such qualities or virtues with which they accord, but where there is contradiction instead of harmony the natural tendencies act as obstacles and do not allow any other quality to grow.

For example, generosity and bountifulness demand that a person should possess the feeling of pity and God-fearing so that on seeing anyone in poverty or want his heart would rend, and his feelings would be disturbed at others' tribulations while the dictates of bravery and fighting require that instead of pity and compassion there should be the passion of blood-shed and killing, prompting the person at every moment to enter into scuffle, ready to kill or be killed.

These two qualities differ so widely that it is not possible to fuse the delicacies of generosity into the stiff manifestations of bravery just as bravery cannot be expected from Hatim nor generosity from Rustam But the personality of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (p.b.u.b.) showed full accord with every greatness and complete harmony with every accomplishment, and there was no good attribute or accomplishment which he lacked, nor any robe of greatness or beauty which did not fit his body.

Thus the contradictory qualities of generosity and bravery were found in him side by side. If he rained like the cloud in generosity, he also fought bravely standing firm as a mountain.

Thus his generosity and liberty of nature was of a degree that even during, days of want and starvation whatever he earned as the wage of his day's toil its major part was distributed among the poor and the starving, and he would never allow a beggar to return disappointed from his door, so much so that even when in the battle field the enemy asked him his sword he threw it before him being confident of the prowess of his naked arm.

An Urdu couplet says:

*The unbeliever depends on his sword but the believer fights even without it.*

And his bravery and courage was such that the onslaught of armies could not shake the firmness of his foot with the result that he achieved success in every encounter and even the bravest fighter could not save his life in an encounter with him. Thus Ibn Qutaybah writes in al-Ma'arif, "Whomever he encountered was prostrated."

The heartless nature of the brave is not wont to thinking or pondering nor do they have anything to do with foresight or fore-judging but 'Ali (p.b.u.b.) had the quality of thinking of the highest degree. Thus, ash-Shafi'i said as follows:

What can I say about a man in whom three qualities existed with three other qualities that were never found together in any other man-- Generosity with want, Bravery with sagacity and Knowledge with practical achievements.

It was the result of this proper thinking and correct judgment that when after the death of the Prophet some people advised him to fight and promised to enlist warriors for him he rejected this advice, although on such occasions even a slight support is enough to encourage the heartless brave, yet 'Ali (a.s.) far-sighted mind at once foresaw that if battle was raged at that moment the voice of Islam would be submerged under the clutter of swords.

And then even if success was achieved it would be said that the position was gained by dint of sword and that there was no right for it. Thus, by withholding his sword on the one hand he provided protection to Islam and on the other saved his own fight from the imputation of bloodshed.

When the veins are full of daring blood and the bosom full of flames of anger and wrath it is extremely difficult to curb the passion of vengeance by adopting the course of forgiving and, despite authority and power, to pardon and overlook. But 'Ali's (a.s.) metal used to shine on such occasions when his forgiving nature would accommodate even his bloodthirsty foes.

Thus, at the end of the Battle of Jamal he made a general proclamation that no one who flees away from the field or seeks our protection would be molested and he let go without any punishment even such enemies as Marwan ibn Hakam and 'Abdullah ibn Zubayr. And the treatment that he meted out to 'A'ishah matchless manifestation of his nobility and high character --is that in spite of her open enmity and rebellion he sent with her women in men's garb to escort her to Medina.

By giving his own personal malice the garb of fundamental differences man not only deceives others but also tries to keep himself under deception, and in these conditions such a delicate situation arises that a man fails to distinguish and separate his personal malice from a fundamental difference but easily mixing them together considers that he has followed the Command of Allah, and in this way he satisfies his

passion for vengeance as well. But Amir al-mu'minin's discerning eyes never got deceived nor did they willingly deceive themselves.

Thus, on an occasion when after prostrating the opponent he placed himself on his bosom the vanquished opponent spat on his face. As man his rage should have risen and his hand should have moved quicker but instead of being enraged he got off from the man's bosom lest his action would be tarnished by personal feeling, and slayed him only after the anger had subsided.

There is nothing in common between combat and encounter and reclusion and God-fearing because one shows valor and courage while the other supplication and submission. But Amir al-mu'minin was a unique combination of both these qualities as his hands that were bound in devotion were equally active in the battle-field, and side by side with relaxing in seclusion for devotion he was a common visitor of the field of action.

The scene of the Night of Harir puts human wit in astonishment and wonder when closing his eyes to the bloody action around the spread his prayer cloth and engaged himself in prayer with full peace of mind and heart while arrows were darting off sometimes over his head and sometimes from his right or left. But he remained engaged in Allah's remembrance without any fear or apprehension.

After finishing he again cast his hand on the sword's handle and the fierce battle that then followed is unparalleled in history. The position was that on all sides there was such hue and cry and fleeing activity that even voices falling en the ears could not be discerned. Of course, after every moment or so his own call of *Allahu Akbar* rose in tho atmosphere and resounded in the ears, and every such call meant death of a foe.

Those who counted these calls of *takbir* recorded their number as five hundred and twenty three.

The taste for learning and God-knowing does not combine with material activity but Arnir a.1-mu'minin adorned the meetings of learning and scholarship along with war-like pursuits, and he watered the field of Islam with springs of learning and truth along with shedding streams of blood (in battles).

Where there is perfection of learning, then, even if there is no complete absence of action, there must no doubt exist shortness of action, but Amir al-mu'minin treated the field of knowledge and action equally, as has been already shown in ash-Shafi'i's verse.

Examples of harmony in utterance and action are quite rare but Amir al-mu'minin's action preceded his utterance, as he himself says:

O' people I do not exhort you to any action but that I myself first proceeded towards it before you and do not desist you from any matter but that I first desist from it myself.

As soon as we think of a recluse and a pious man we visualize a face full of frowns because for piety severity of temper and hardness of face are inseparable so much so that the thought of a smile on the

lips of a pious man is regarded as a sin. But despite extreme piety and self denial Amir al-mu'minin always had such appearance that his light temper and brightness of face was apparent from his looks and his lips always bore a playful smile.

He never showed frowns on his fore-head like the dry recluse, so much so that when people could not find any defect in him this very lightness of temper was taken to be his fault, while hard temper and bitter face was held to be a virtue.

If a man possesses a cheerful heart and joyous temper he cannot command authority over others; but Arnir al-mu'minin's cheerful face was so full of awe and dignity that no eye could face it. Once Mu'awiyah tauntingly said "May Allah bless 'Ali. He was a man of cheerful taste:" then Qays ibn Sa'd retorted.

"By Allah despite cheerful disposition and entertaining countenance he was more awe-inspiring than a hungry lion and this awe was due to his piety not like your awe over the non-descripts of Syria."

Where there is rule and authority there is also a crowd of servants and workers, checks of grandeur and eminence with equipment of pageantry but Arnir al-rnu'minin's period of rule was an example of the highest simplicity. In him people saw only a tattered turban in place of a Royal Crown, patched apparel in place of the regal robes and the floor of earth in place of the ruler's throne.

He never liked grandeur and pageantry nor allowed show of external grandiosity. Once he was passing on a horse back when Harb ibn Shurahbil started walking with him and began talking. Then Arnie al-mu'minin said to him, "Get back because walking on foot with me by one like you is mischievous for the ruler (me) and an insult to the believer (you)."

In short he was such a versatile personality in whom numerous contradictory qualities had joined together and all the good attributes were centered in their full brightness as though his oneself was a collection of several selves and each self was an astounding portrait of achievement which showed forth the delineation of distinction in its untainted form, and on whose accomplishment one wonders with bewilderment.

## **About the Addressee, Malik Al-Ashtar**

Amir al-mu'minin wrote this instrument for Malik ibn al-Harith al-Ashtar, when he was appointed the Governor of Egypt in 38 AH. Malik al-Ashtar was one of the chief companions of Amir al-mu'minin. He had shown great endurance and steadfastness and perfect confidence and trust in Amir al-mu'minin.

He had attained the utmost nearness and attachment to him by molding his conduct and character after the conduct and character of Amir al-mu'minin. This can be gauged by Arnir al-mu'minins words: "Malik was to me as I was to the Messenger of Allah." (Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, vol. 15, p. 98; al-A'lam, vol. 6, p. 131).

Malik al-Ashtar too, actuated by selfless feelings of service, took a very active part in military encounters

and proved himself to be Amir al-mu'minin's arm in all battles and encounters. He showed such feats of courage and daring that his bravery was acknowledged throughout Arabia. Along with this bravery he was also conspicuous in endurance and forbearing.

In this connection, Warram ibn Abi Firas an-Nakha'i has written that once Malik was passing through the market of Kufah with the dress and turban made of gunny-cloth when a shopkeeper finding him in this condition and clothing, he threw some rotten leaves upon him, but he did not at all mind this dirty behavior, nor did he even look at him. Rather, he quietly stepped forward.

Then someone said to this shopkeeper, "Do you know to whom you have been so insolent?" He replied that he did not know who he was, whereupon he said that it was Malik al-Ashtar, the companion of Amir al-mu'minin. Hearing this, he lost his senses and at once ran behind him to seek pardon for this insolence and humiliating treatment. While in his search he reached a mosque where Malik was offering prayers.

When he finished the prayers this man went forward and fell on his feet and begged pardon with great pertinacity and weeping. Malik raised the man's beard up and said, "By Allah, I have come to the mosque to pray to Allah to forgive you. I myself had pardoned you that very moment, and I hope Allah too will pardon you." (*Tanbihu l'khwatir wa nuzhatu 'n-nawazir, vol. 1, p.2; al-Bihar, vol. 42, p. 157*).

This is the forgiveness and tolerance of a warrior at whose name courage trembled, and whose swordsmanship was acknowledged by the brave men of Arabia. And this is the real sign of bravery that a man should exercise self control during bitterness of anger and rage and endure hardships with patience and calmness. In this connection, Amir al-mu'minin's saying is that, "The bravest of men is he who over-powers his passions."

However, besides these characteristics and qualities, he had a perfect aptitude for organization and administration. Thus, when the 'Uthmani (al-'Uthmaniyyah) party began to spread the germs of destruction in Egypt and tried to upset the law and order of the country by mischief and revolt then Amir al-mu'minin removed Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr from the governorship and decided to appoint Malik al-Ashtar in his place, although at that time he was posted as the Governor of Nasibin.

However, Amir al-mu'minin sent him word that he should name someone as his deputy and come to Amir al-mu'minin. On receipt of this order Malik al-Ashtar appointed Shabib ibn 'Amir al-Azid in his place and himself came to Amir al-mu'minin. Amir al-mu'minin gave him a warrant of appointment and sent him off to Egypt, and also sent a written order to Egyptians to obey him.

When Mu'awiyah got the news of Malik al-Ashtar's appointment through his spies he was perplexed because he had promised 'Amir ibn al-'As that he would give him the governorship of Egypt in reward of his services and he had hoped that 'Amir ibn al-'As would easily defeat Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr and wrest the power from him, but could not imagine conquering Egypt by defeating Malik al-Ashtar, He therefore decided to do away with him before he took over the charge.

For this he arranged with a landlord of the city of al-'Arish (or al-Qulzum) that when Malik passed through al-'Arish on his way to Egypt he should kill him by some device or other and in reward for this the revenue of his estate would be written off. So, when Malik al-Ashtar reached al-'Arish with retinue and force the chief of al-'Arish gave him a good ovation and insisted on having Malik as his guest.

Malik agreed and stayed at his place. When he finished the meal the host gave him some syrup of honey to drink in which he had mixed poison. Soon after drinking it the poison began to show its effect and before the eyes of everyone this great warrior known for his swordsmanship and for putting the rows of the enemy to flight calmly went into the embrace of death.

When Mu'awiyah got news of his success of this device he was overjoyed and shouted in merriment, "Oh, honey is also an army of Allah", and then said during a speech:

"Ali ibn Ahi Talib had two right hand men. One was chopped off on the day of Siffin and he was 'Ammar ibn Yasir, and the second has been severed now and he is Malik al-Ashtar."

But when the news of Malik's assassination reached Amir al-mu'minin, he was highly grieved and sorrowful, and then he said:

"Malik! Who is Malik? If Malik was a stone, he was hard and solid; if he was a rock, he was a great rock which had no parallel. It seems his death has made me also lifeless. I swear by Allah that his death made the Syrians joyous and insulted the Iraqis.

Then he continued:

"Women have become barren to give birth to such as Malik." (at-Tabari, vol. 1, pp. 3392-3395; Ibn al-Athir, vol.3, pp. 352-353; al-Ya'qubi, vol. 2, p. 194; al-Isti'ab, vol. 3, p. 1366; Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, vol. 6, pp. 74-77; Ibn Kathir, vol. 7, pp. 313-314; Abu 'l-Fida', vol. I, p. 179).

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