A Letter al-Jahiz Never Wrote

Al-Musawwar, 12 March 1948.

1 To …

2 May God ease you toward good, and ease good toward you; may God turn you away from evil, and turn evil away from you; may God guide you to the truth, and guide the truth to you; may God lead you to what is right, and lead what is right to you; may God spread contentment through your heart, and pour delight over your soul, and send down tranquility upon your conscience, and purify your inmost self of resentment and rancor; may He make what is seen of your affairs good tidings and blessing, and what is hidden of your secret ease and security; may He smooth your company for the near friend, and prepare your forgiveness for the distant foe; may He raise your standing above the schemes of schemers and the envy of the envious, and lower your wing to those who take refuge in you and flee to you for shelter; and may He keep you firm upon that which is set in your nature: giving to the deprived, relieving the distressed, aiding the needy, consoling the grief-stricken, taking the hand of the weak, overlooking the wrongdoer's wrong, and turning away from the ignorance of the ignorant.

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4 With all of this I pray for you when I meet you, and when I am far from you, and with all of this I pray for myself, when I am alone and sincere with it, and when I am diverted from it, averse to it. God is witness that I have never wished anything for myself without wishing its like, or better, for you, and I have never disliked anything for myself, or in myself, without hoping that God would preserve you from it, keep you free of it, and spare you from falling into it. For you are the companion of my boyhood and the friend of my youth, you are my soul's own brother and my heart's intimate, my partner in good fortune when it lasts, my ally against calamity when it strikes, my support against misfortune when it grows dark, and my backer against the days when events occur in them and problems grow tangled within them. I have never counseled you, nor advised you, nor been gentle with you, but that I found myself counseling, advising, and being gentle with my own soul in exactly the same way.

5 And I do not know that you have ever needed a friend's counsel and an intimate's advice as you need them now, now that your standing

has risen among men of affairs, and the gravest of the reins of government has been placed in your hands, so that the covetous covet you, the anxious grow anxious on your account, hopes have fastened themselves upon you, and wishes have sought your shelter, and you have become, in the fullness of your fortune and the breadth of your standing, such that you greet neither day nor night, nor does an hour of either pass, nor a moment of either, without some thinker thinking of you, wishing to take shelter beneath a wing of your favor, or to guard against a measure of your displeasure; so you are both hoped for and feared, both loved and resented, both looked up to and watched closely, both envied with delight and envied with malice. And when a man attains what you have attained of elevated standing, lofty position, extended authority, and far-reaching power, it is fitting that he hold himself apart from vanity and conceit, clear his soul of arrogance and pride, protect it from being swept along by overconfidence, from relying on his own strength and reach, from being satisfied with wealth and might, and that he remember that he has grown strong after weakness, grown rich after poverty, grown self-sufficient after need, and that the conscience of the days preserves for men, from the secrets of the unseen, what they love and what they dislike, and stores up for them, among events, what they recognize and what they deny. For whoever is granted strength may yet have weakness decreed for him, and whoever is given a firm footing on earth may yet find his own house turn against him, and whoever finds the days smiling upon him may yet find fate scowling at him; for good fortune is a trust deposited in its holders' hands, which the one who entrusted it may yet reclaim, and strength is a loan in the hands of the strong, which may yet be taken from them to be returned to the weak; and God, Mighty and Exalted, says: "And such days We deal out in turns among mankind" — and the old poet said:

A day against us, and a day for us;
a day we grieve, and a day we rejoice.

7 So the very first thing I warn you against, O brother-friend and tender intimate, is self-regard, being deluded by your own strength and reach, and being taken in by fortune's smiles; for it may well prove you true today only to prove you false tomorrow. So be wary of your own soul before all else you are wary of, and have pity upon it from itself before you have pity upon it from other men, and remember the word of God, Mighty and Exalted, in the story of Joseph, upon him be peace: "and I do not absolve myself; indeed the soul is prone to evil" — so do not carry out

for your own soul any command you receive from it until you have pondered it and reflected upon it at length; and however much fortune favors you, remember your own state before it favored you, and reckon that you may well return to what you once were; and remember your opinion of men of opinion before you became one of them yourself, and your criticism and judgment of them before you rose to your place among them. And know that people say of you now just what you used to say of them, and judge you by just the measure you used to judge them; and remember, first of all things to remember, that you have a conscience which approves and disapproves, which recognizes and denies, which praises and blames, and that the burdens of rule may distract you from it, or distract it from you, for as long as the means of power are extended to you. But you will one day be free for it, just as it will one day be free for you, by day or by night; so take care that you hear from it nothing but good.

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9 And beyond all this, you are in need of a friend's counsel and an intimate's help in the ties that governing has created between you and other men, for you now manage their affairs and tend to their interests, ruling them gently at times, and ruling them with severity at other times. You hold out hope and you instill fear, you spread desire and you spread dread, you extend the means of expectation and you send down upon hearts the thunderbolts of despair. So men are divided between one who seeks in you a means, one who lies in wait for your downfall, and one who seizes in you an opportunity. All of them show you affection, but most of them conceal resentment against you, and fold their hearts toward you upon the worst that hearts can be folded upon.

10 And the thing I fear most for you from other men is their striving to bring you tales, their walking to you with slander, and their seeking your favor through calumny; for men seek every means to the ruler, and draw near to him by every path, competing for what he holds, and this tempts them to scheme against one another, plot against one another, and lie to one another, each of them wishing to gain from the government more than his rival gains, and so they live, because of this, in constant anxiety, unbroken mutual envy, and persistent mutual hatred, pursuing their hopes by every path, straight or crooked, by whatever conduct is permitted or forbidden, by whatever word and deed is fitting or unseemly, exchanging ill turns among themselves, yet reserving for you the worst of the wrongs and evils they exchange, corrupting your heart

against the people, and thereby corrupting the people's hearts against you, worsening your opinion of them, and thereby worsening their opinion of you. And in the end they succeed in corrupting your own affairs for you, worsening your opinion of your own self, driving a wedge between you and your own conscience, and troubling for you the rest of the night and the vigor of the day.

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12 And if it is incumbent upon you to be wary of your own self, and to be wary of other men, then it may well become clear to you that rule is an affliction and not a blessing, a trial by which souls are tested, hearts are tempted, and consciences are refined — toil, not rest; misery, not happiness; anxiety, not calm; fear, not security. And remember — may God set you right — the days when we used to meet and speak of this ruler and that among those who came before you, blaming them much and praising them little, always pitying them, and wishing, for the friend among them, that God would lift the gloom from him and relieve his distress, and set down from him the burdens and weights of rule, and restore him to that free, generous life in which a man carries nothing but the burdens of his own soul, and in which he does not weigh his own soul down with the burdens of other men — and how numerous are the burdens of other men!

13 And you may well smile, whether in contentment or in displeasure, when you learn that I am writing you this letter, carrying within me, toward you, such love, such tenderness, and such compassion as moves me to ask God for your wellbeing, and to hope of Him that He lift from you the yoke and fetters of rule, and return you to me from this trial safe and whole, content with mere return as your spoil; for the best spoil for rulers is to emerge from rule as pure as they were before they entered it, having gained from it nothing but the safety of their return!