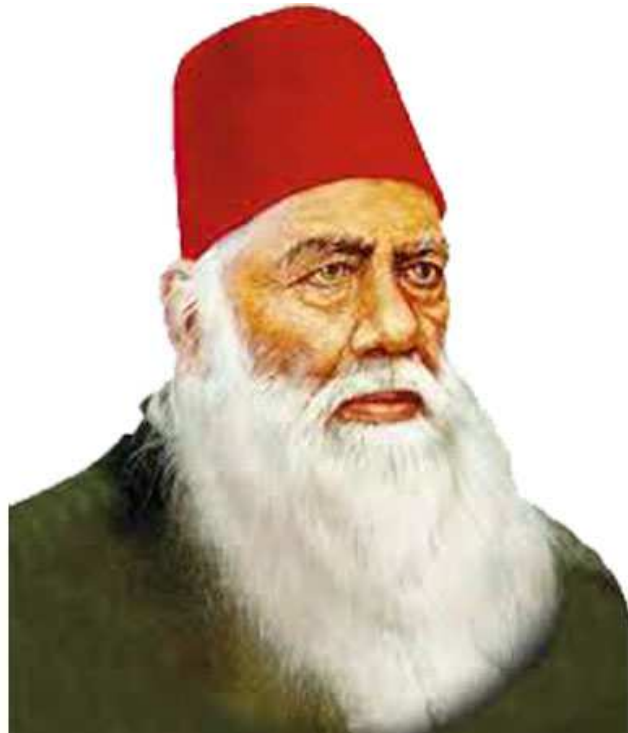


The days bygone

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Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

By Sir Syed Ahmad Khan An old man is sitting alone in his house in the sinister darkness of the last night of the year. The dense clouds are making the night even scarier and eerier. Thunder, storm and lightning are bloodcurdling. The downpour is torrential. His heart is pumping fast and he feels suffocated. The old man is sad to the very core, but his predicament does not result from his loneliness, or his dark house, or the scary night, or the storm, or the thunder or the rain. It is not because the year is dying either. His pain emanates from his memories of old times and the more he remembers the days bygone, the worse his pain escalates. Tears roll down his face that he has covered with his hands. His past reels around in his mind's eye. He reminisces about his childhood when he had no sorrows and worries; when his sweet mints were more precious than gold coins; when his parents, his siblings and the entire family loved him; when with his books in his arms, he used to hop to school happily in fond anticipation of the fun he would have. The thought of his school brings back to him the memories of his schoolmates. He becomes sadder, and exclaims, "O Time, O Time, O days bygone, what a pity, I learnt to value you only too late." Then he thinks of the time of his youth, his fair and firm cheeks, muscular body, lustrous dewy eyes, pearl bright teeth, and his heart overwhelming with desire and the tantalizing happiness of human emotions. He remembers all that he was and is no more. There is gloom behind his eyes and he remembers how his parents used to reprimand and discipline him, and tell him of God's obedience and he used to shrug and say, "Ah...There is always another day." He never imagined that old age would overtake him one day. "Wouldn't it have been nicer, had I learnt the value of time earlier?" he thinks. "It would have been much nicer, had I been obedient to God and had enough good deeds in my account." Alas! Time has passed. Alas! Time has passed. What good is it to repent now? I destroyed myself by saying, "There is always another day." He stands up and gropes his way to the windowpane. He opens the window and looks into the heart of the spooky night. The darkness is overwhelming out in the cloudy space. The noise of thunder is chilling his spine. His heart is pounding. The frightening storm is blowing the autumn leaves and breaking the dried twigs off their lifeless branches. "Oh no, that past life of mine seems just as ominous as this

night," he lets out a shriek of madness and gropes his way back to where he was sitting earlier. He lapses into memories again. He remembers his mother, his father, his brothers and sisters and everyone he used to know and who by now must have turned to dust in their dark graves. He feels his mother is standing right there and hugging him with her eyes wet, "O son, the time's gone." As if he can see his father's radiant face and hear him say, "Son, we only said things for your own good." As if his brothers and sisters are standing there still, gnawing in despair. They are crying in sorrow. Friends and relatives all stand around, sad and motionless as if saying, "Nothing can be done now. It's too late." He remembers his bad behavior with which he had often treated all of them on various occasions. He remembers how he used to grieve his mother and sadden his father with his rough conduct, how he used to give troubles to his siblings and how often he used to be unkind to his friends and acquaintances. And despite all this, he can feel such deep affection from those dissipated bodies. He is heartbroken and more suffocated. He screams, "Alas! Time's gone. Nothing will compensate for my losses." He anxiously stumbles his way to the window again. He opens it and sees that the storm has calmed down. There is no lightning, no thunder, no rain, but the night is still atrociously horrific. His anxiety attenuates a little. He drags himself back to his place. He sits down and travels back into his twilight years. He is youthful no more, nor is his heart so full of passion. Gone are all thrill and excitement. He sees himself more inclined to sobriety rather than to the wantonness of the springtime of life. He thinks of his good deeds, his visits to mosques and his prayers, fasting, pilgrimages and charities, and of the wells he had dug for others and feels only slightly consoled. He thinks of sages and sheikhs he had fed and served. He remembers great souls to whom he had once owed allegiance. He calls all of them for help, but to no avail. He sees that his good deeds have ended with him. The hungry are hungry again. The mosques are in ruins. The wells are dry. Neither sages, nor sheikhs, no one responds to his call. He is anxious again and thinks it was not worth it to be damned in ephemeral things. Why didn't this afterthought occur earlier? Now it is too late. He screams again in anguish and tribulation, "O Time, O precious Time, I have lost you indeed?" Flustered and fitful, he flounders back to the window. He opens it and sees the sky is clear. The storm has stopped. Stars are twinkling. The darkness is not so dense anymore. To relent his feeling of suffocation, he casts an easy look at the scintillating stars. Of a sudden, he sees a beam of bright light in the middle of the sky and in this light he sees a beautiful woman decorated like a bride. He cannot take his eyes away from that embodiment of heavenly beauty and grace. The bride is slowly coming closer, and closer and very close to him. He is dumbfounded to see her exquisite and elegant beauty. He gathers all his piety and love and asks softly, "Who are you?" "I am man's immortal good deeds," she replies. "Is there a way I can win you?" he asks. "Yes, there is," she says, "a simple, but difficult way. Whoever serves people like that Bedouin, who said *أنقص لاو يزيدي لا والله* (What we get from Allah is neither more, nor less), can win me. Nothing in this world is everlasting. Man is the only creation who will live till the end of this world. The good deeds he performs go a long way down his generations. Prayers, fasting, Haj and alms and charities come to an end with him. His death puts an end to all. Material things also get destroyed with time, but man's compassionate services to other people live forever. I am the soul of all humans. Serve mankind if you wish to get me. At the least, serve your own people with your heart, your wealth and your full devotion," says the bride and vanishes into the night air. He again remembers his errors and negligence of the past. He takes stock of his yesteryears and finds that he had never served mankind well enough. Not even his people. All his deeds and endeavors were based on his selfish interest. Whatever good deeds he had done were with the intention of getting rewards from God. As if he was trying to bribe Him. He had done nothing with the pure selfless intention of serving mankind. Looking at his present, he is convinced that there is no way he can win that lovely bride. Now toward the end of his life, he can hardly serve anyone well. "O Time, O Time, I wish I could have you back again," he cries. "I would give away all my wealth if there was a hope to see my past and youth return," he laments madly and falls unconscious. After a few minutes, he hears sweet and soft voices. His mother is standing near him. She hugs and kisses him. He sees his father too. His little brothers and sisters weave a circle around him. He hears his mother say, "Son, why are you anxious? Why are you crying on New Year's Day? Why are you sobbing? Get up. Have a shower, put on your best clothes and celebrate the New Year. Your brothers and sisters are waiting." He

heaves a great sigh of relief to realize that he was dreaming and in his dream he had become an old man. He tells his dream to his mother, who says, "Son, promise yourself, you will not lead a life like that old man, but will listen to your bride instead." — Translated and adapted from the Urdu by Mohammad Saulat Abbas, KAU, Jeddah

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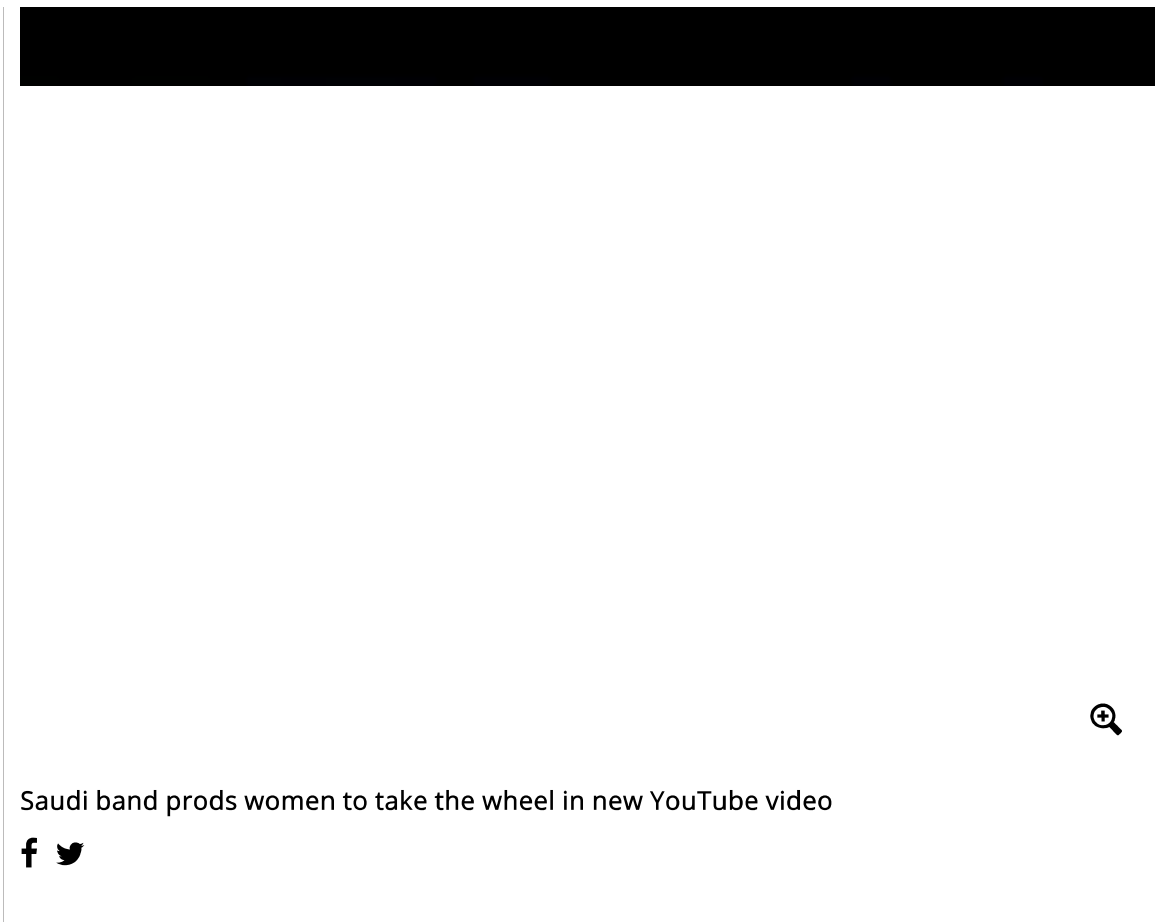
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