

Anatole France: “History of Mankind”*

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When the young prince Zémire succeeded his father on the throne of Persia, he called all the academicians of his kingdom together, and said:

‘The learned Zeb, my instructor, has taught me that monarchs would be liable to fewer errors if they were enlightened by past experience. Therefore I wish to study the history of nations. I order you to compose a universal history and to neglect nothing to make it complete.’

The wise men promised to carry out the prince’s desire, and having withdrawn they set to work immediately. At the end of twenty years they appeared before the king, followed by a caravan composed of twelve camels each bearing 500 volumes. The secretary of the academy, having prostrated himself on the steps of the throne, spoke in these terms:

‘Sire, the academicians of your kingdom have the honour to place at your feet the universal history that they have compiled at your majesty’s behests. It comprises 6000 volumes and contains all that we could possibly collect regarding the customs of nations and the vicissitudes of empires. We have inserted the ancient chronicles which have been luckily preserved, and we have illustrated them with abundant notes on geography, chronology, and diplomacy. The prolegomena are alone one camel’s load, and the paralipomena are borne with great difficulty by another camel.’

The king answered:

‘Gentlemen, I thank you for the trouble that you have taken. But I am very busy with the cares of state. Moreover, I have aged while you worked. I am arrived, as says the Persian poet, half-way along the road of life, and even supposing I die full of years, I cannot reasonably hope to have the time to read such a lengthy history. It shall be placed in the archives of the kingdom. Be good enough to make me a summary better fitted to the brevity of human life.’

The Persian academicians worked twenty years; then they brought to the king 1500 volumes on three camels.

‘Sire,’ said the permanent secretary, in a weakened voice, ‘here is our new work. We believe we have omitted nothing essential.’

‘That may be,’ answered the king, ‘but I shall not read it. I am old; lengthy undertakings do not suit my years; abridge it further and do not be long about it.’

They lingered so little that at the end of ten years they returned followed by a young elephant bearing 500 volumes.

‘I flatter myself I have been succinct,’ said the permanent secretary.

‘You have not yet been sufficiently so,’ answered the king.

‘I am at the end of my life. Abridge, abridge, if you want me to know the history of mankind ere I die.’

The permanent secretary reappeared before the palace at the end of five years. Walking with crutches, he held by the bridle a small donkey which bore a big book on its back.

‘Hasten,’ said the officer to him, ‘the king is dying.’

The king in fact was on his death-bed. He turned on the academician and his big book his nearly expiring gaze, and said with a sigh:

‘I shall die, then, without knowing the history of mankind!’

‘Sire,’ replied the learned man, who was almost as near death as himself, ‘I will sum it up for you in three words: *je* They were born, they suffered, they died!

Thus did the king of Persia learn the history of the world in the evening of his life.

*<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/74713>