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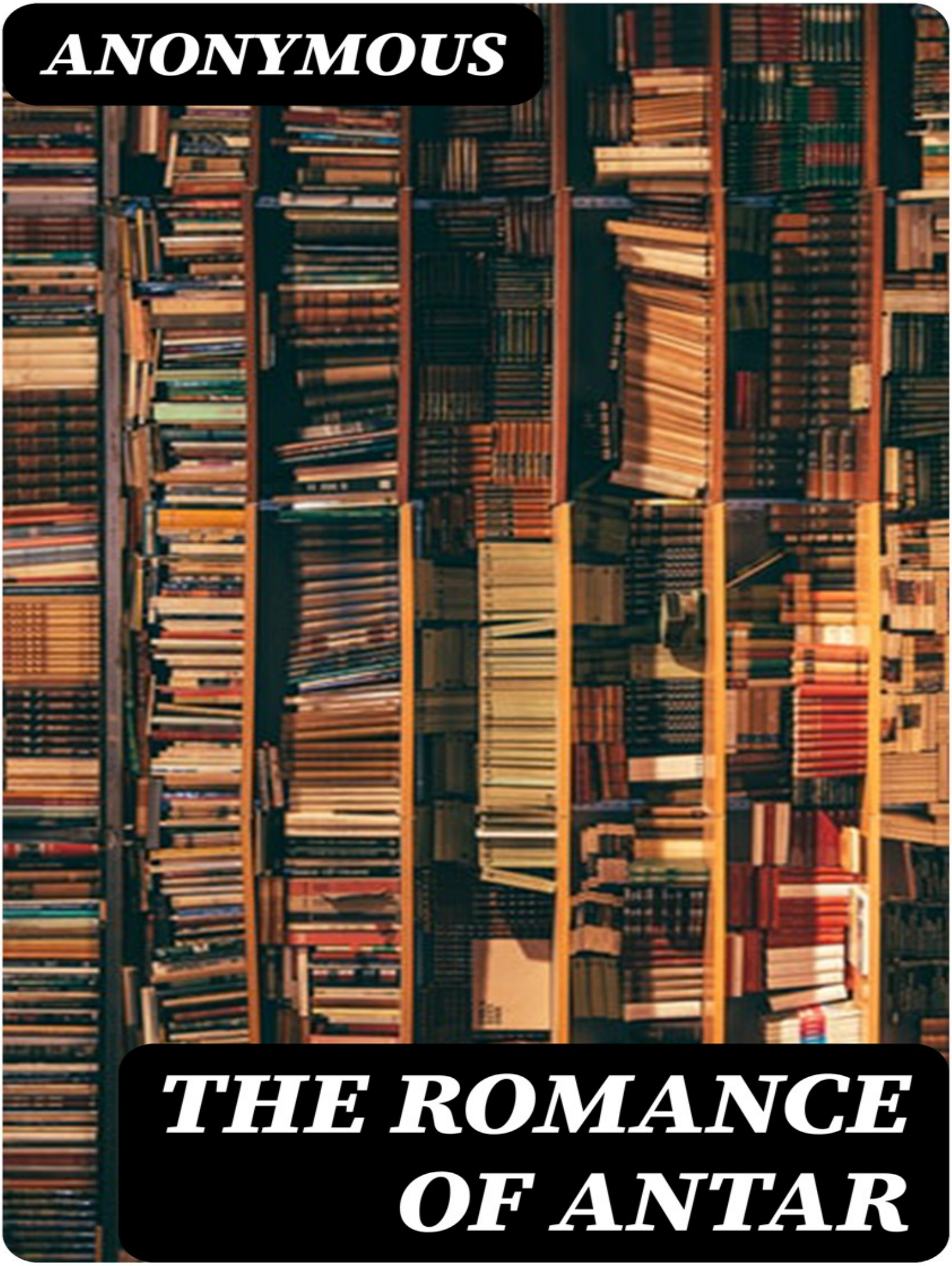
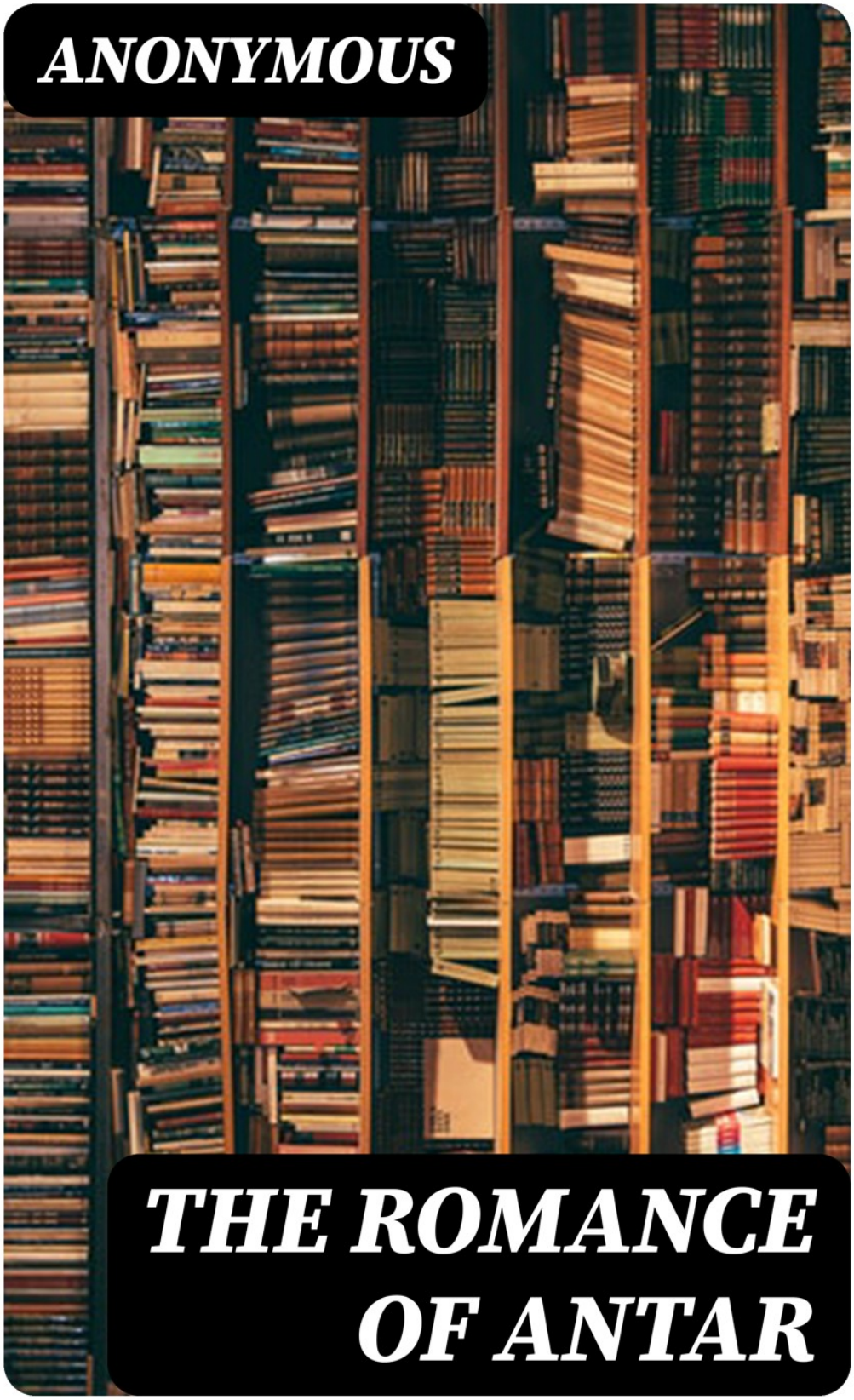


THE ROMANCE OF ANTAR



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THE ROMANCE OF ANTAR

Anonymous

The Romance of Antar

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The romantic figure of Antar, or Antarah, takes the same place in Arabian literature as that of Achilles among the Greeks. The Cid in Spain, Orlando in Italy, and Arthur in England, are similar examples of national ideals put forth by poets and romance writers as embodiments of a certain half-mythic age of chivalry, when personal valor, prudence, generosity, and high feeling gave the warrior an admitted preeminence among his fellows. The literature of Arabia is indeed rich in novels and tales. The "Thousand and One Nights" is of world-wide reputation, but the "Romance of Antar" is much less artificial, more expressive of high moral principles, and certainly superior in literary style to the fantastic recitals of the coffee house and bazaar, in which Sinbad and Morgiana figure. A true picture of Bedouin society, in the centuries before Mohammed had conquered the Arabian peninsula, is given us in the charming episodes of Antar. We see the encampments of the tribe, the camels yielding milk and flesh for food, the women friends and councillors of their husbands, the boys inured to arms from early days, the careful breeding of horses, the songs of poet and minstrel stirring all hearts, the mail-clad lines of warriors with lance and sword, the supreme power of the King--often dealing out justice with stern, sudden, and inflexible ferocity. Among these surroundings Antar appears, a dazzling and irresistible warrior and a poet of wonderful power. The Arab classics, in years long before Mohammed had taken the Kaaba and made it the talisman of his creed,

were hung in the little shrine where the black volcanic stone was kept. They were known as Maallakat, or Suspended Books, which had the same meaning among Arabian literati as the term classic bore among the Italian scholars of the Renaissance. Numbered with these books of the Kaaba were the poems of Antar, who was thus the Taliessin of Arabian chivalry.

It is indeed necessary to recollect that in reading the episodes of Antar we have been taken back to the heroic age in the Arabian peninsula. War is considered the noblest occupation of a man, and Khaled despises the love of a noble maiden "from pride in his passion for war." Antar has his famous horse as the Cid had his Babicca, and his irresistible sword as Arthur his Excalibur. The wealth of chiefs and kings consists in horses and camels; there is no mention of money or jewelry. When a wager is made the stakes are a hundred camels. The commercial spirit of the Arabian Nights is wanting in this spirited romance of chivalry. The Arabs had sunk to a race of mere traders when Aladdin became possessed of his lamp, and the trickery, greed, and avarice of peddlers and merchants are exhibited in incident after incident of the "Thousand and One Nights." War is despised or feared, courage less to be relied upon than astute knavery, and one of the facts that strikes us is the general frivolity, dishonesty, and cruelty which prevail through the tales of Bagdad. The opposite is the case with Antar. Natural passion has full play, but nobility of character is taken seriously, and generosity and sensibility of heart are portrayed with truthfulness and naiveté. Of course the whole romance is a collection of many romantic stories: it