

Note This is the draft of a forthcoming book, on which constructive comment is welcome. Please email comments to fbennion@aol.com.

How Young Men Avoid Mistakes

PROVERBIAL LIFE LINES

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2005

Proverbs are but marinated errors.

John Quainton

The English are racially immune to advice.

Rudyard Kipling

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Prelude

Some might say that young men should not try to avoid mistakes, because that's the way they learn. Others would retort that they can't avoid mistakes even if they try. My answer is to recognise that rightly or wrongly young men would wish to avoid making mistakes and I would wish to help them if I can. I was once a young man myself, and made many avoidable mistakes.

Here proverbs can help. For example in 2005 my hairdresser in the Devon village of Otterton told me that her 25-year old son had injured his feet by jumping over a 3-foot hedge. When I asked how she said: 'There was a ten-foot drop the other side'. Obviously he had not heard the proverb Look before you leap. What does a young man say to himself about all this? Something on the following lines I fancy.

I must decide each moment what to do next. Wishing to be good, I yearn to decide as I ought. I want to guide others to do the same. For all this I need help, for none of us can puzzle everything out alone. If we try to be so cockily self-sufficient, we make avoidable errors. They are avoidable because other people have already made them, and unavoidably left records of the fact. We escape the infliction of pain on ourselves by learning the lesson of its earlier infliction on another. Let the mistakes that matter to me be someone else's, then the pains will be theirs too. Yet people try to keep mistakes to themselves, for they are seldom proud of them. Even where they are known and written about, the writing may not come my way. If it does come my way, I may not feel like troubling myself to read and absorb it. So

what I yearn for is a simple, straightforward, once-for-all rule of thumb that amounts to a rule of life. This will tell me at each moment what to do, and relieve me of the agonies of moral choice.

The Golden Rule?

Some think they have found that rule of thumb in the so-called Golden Rule. All European languages know this as a rule of conduct. It was laid down in the New Testament: whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them. It is found earlier in Confucius and ancient Greece and Rome. Lord Chesterfield said: do as you would be done by. The W. C. Fields version is: do unto others before they do unto you.

So there we are. The Golden Rule enjoys support both from the religious and the irreligious. Has the young man then found the guidance he is seeking? Alas no. The Golden Rule is a fallacy.

Do as you would be done by, says the Golden Rule. How then would we be done by? Let us spell it out. The truth (if we could be persuaded to admit it) is that each and every one of us would want other people to treat us like royalty. Let them shower love, riches and honours upon us. It is only what we deserve. We would each desire, if our inmost wishes were known, to be the most cosseted and adored creature on earth. We want to be respected more than anyone else, to have more power than anyone else, to have first priority if we are sick, the best seat at every spectacle, the best suite in whichever luxury hotel we choose to patronise at

any time anywhere on the globe's surface. Minions, wherever we chance to be, must be present in multitudes to kow-tow and bow down to us. They should, *always without secretly mocking*, defer to our every word and whim. It is, after all, no more than our due.

We want the handsomest and cleverest man or woman as our lover, the finest palace as our residence, the most amusing and faithful creature as our devoted steadfast friend, the trustiest servitor as the chief of our body-slaves. Nothing, in our own humble opinion, is too good for us. *That* is how we would be done by. *That* is why we 'invest' in the Lottery, or the pools, or the premium bond, or the *Sun* Tringo-Bingo. One and all, we want to be winners. We are meritorious; and that is what we merit.

If in this way I wish all other people to give *me* the best, how can it be my rule of life to give every one of *them* the best? The best can be for the very few only, or it must cease to be the best. Preferably it is for me alone!

Can we vary the Golden Rule?

We might try to rescue the Golden Rule by expressing it differently. Suppose we introduce the concept of reasonableness. It is plainly unreasonable to expect everyone in the world to treat *me* better than they treat anyone else. Could it be a useful rule of conduct to say *do as you might reasonably expect to be done by*? Alas no. It is *reasonable* to expect other people to treat us badly. They so often do.

Suppose then we make the rule say *treat other people in the way that it is reasonable for them to treat you*. All we have then is a rule of conduct that is a long-winded way of saying *behave reasonably*. While admirable in its way, this maxim is of little practical use.

Confucius dealt with the problem by framing the Golden Rule negatively. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. Or as Hobbes put it: do not that to another which thou wouldst not have done to thyself.

In this form the rule is merely a precept against evil doing. It possesses some small value, but nothing like as much as a positive rule of life would have if only it were genuine. Furthermore it is in some applications deceptive. As a guide to the administration of justice for example. (If I have done wrong I may have a strenuous and earnest desire to avoid punishment, yet nevertheless richly deserve it.)

Suppose we put the Golden Rule in another New Testament form: thou shalt *love* thy neighbour as thyself. Is this any more practical? Not for mortals who are unable to be saints. While I should have goodwill towards everyone, I am not capable of *loving* more than a very few. To pretend otherwise is to debase the meaning of human love. Slice yourself too thin, said Alex Haley, and pretty soon you'll have nothing.

In small, clearly-defined matters, the Golden Rule can be a help. If a letter addressed to Hoskins is mistakenly delivered to Haskins, he can do nothing or readdress it. If Haskins thinks for a moment of how much he would hope that Hoskins would readdress a letter of his

delivered to Hoskins by mistake, he may be spurred to make the slight effort involved in doing the decent thing and redirecting.

Whether I do such a thing or not will depend on whether it pleases me to do good. I am not to be coerced into goodness by fear of divine retribution (since I have no such fear). Therefore I shall not be good unless I enjoy it - or there is some realistic human sanction against not doing good. We are not here discussing the case where there is a human sanction, such as a legal penalty. The Golden Rule is about *altruism*, or good conduct in the abstract. It is not a Criminal Code, or it would need to be much more detailed. (Perhaps lack of detail *is* its great defect.)

But there is no such thing as altruism: it is an invention of Auguste Comte's. If, not being under compulsion, I do you a good turn it is to please myself. I do it because it makes me feel good to do you a good turn. It makes me feel bad to see you suffer. I enjoy your expressions of gratitude, and like basking in the approbation of those who witness my good deed. I might even get an honour from the Queen for it, if it is repeated often enough (and someone influential happens to be watching).

Some do good by stealth. They are not altruists either. It is merely that they are more sensitive. They fear that a witness would say what is said here: they only do it to get praise. Who does good by stealth is content with *self* praise. That is not the worst kind. Nor is it the least potent. Self-praisers hug themselves to think how virtuous they are. It is not the worst

kind of hug. To devote yourself on principle to furthering the good of others as your highest moral obligation is to realize, not sacrifice, yourself. Stop feeling so guilty.

While altruism and self-sacrifice do not exist, it is for the good of society that people should act as if they did. People will then treat each other better. For the common good, we should aim to be generous. We should seek to do much more than the minimum for our fellows. Never mind what our motives are. Let us light with our own small flame a fragment of the murky landscape that engulfs us. How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

To accomplish this, having learnt what lessons we can, we must use our own judgement in each circumstance that befalls. There are no short cuts to goodness. A large spirit does not flourish on the paltry rule of thumb. This brings us to yet another defect of the so-called Golden Rule: it is value free. What I would like done to me is not necessarily what my neighbour would like done to him or her. It depends on our respective systems of values. If I am a good Muslim who has written *The Satanic Verses* I would like someone to be kind enough to shoot me. My neighbour Mr Rushdie does not reciprocate this wish.

So where does all that leave the Golden Rule? I hope you will feel it leaves it shattered in pieces. The Golden Rule, said George Bernard Shaw, is that there are no golden rules.

Back to mistakes

So what can we do to find a guide to life? I return to the point I opened with. *Let the mistakes that matter to me be someone else's, then the pains will be theirs too.* I have found from long experience that the best way to avoid mistakes that others have made is to study the proverbs. The great *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a proverb as 'a short pithy saying in common and recognized use; a concise sentence, often metaphorical or alliterative in form, which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience or observation and familiar to all; an adage, a wise saw'.

This is a little book of proverbs. It is addressed with the author's good wishes to every boy, youth or young man who is bright enough to realise there is no need for him to suffer in his future life by making mistakes. Others have already made the same mistakes themselves. To avoid heartache, frustration, and messing up your life, all you need do is note the mistakes others have made before you came along. That's the painless way.

One method of following that way is to study the sayings in this book. They are composed from the mistakes that others have made. Some of these sayings are old; others are original; all are true to life as seen by the youthful male. For life as seen by the youthful female you need to go to some other book. I am writing exclusively for males because I am a male. I have lived in nine decades as a male, and would not presume to advise members of the opposite sex. The sexes are different in many ways, and so their rules of belief and behaviour are to some extent different. Males and females need to be addressed differently.

The short cuts for young males offered here are arranged in pairs, each reinforcing the other. They appear under eight headings: You, Your life, Your home, Your work, Friends and companions, Loving and liking, Family and marriage, and Morality, religion and belief.

If you are already very smart you will read these sayings not once but many times; not on one day but over many days – or months and even years. You will read them slowly and savour them. You will read them thoughtfully and ponder them, even committing some to memory. You will keep coming back to them.

In time you will want to investigate the origins of some of these sayings that particularly appeal to you. On the internet you can easily investigate how they arose and the ways they have been used.

When you investigate you will find that some of the sayings are very old indeed, going back to the Bible or ancient Greece or Rome. This does not mean they are old-fashioned in a pejorative sense. In fact, all of them are timeless. Anyway there are no fashions in true morality, for it too is timeless.

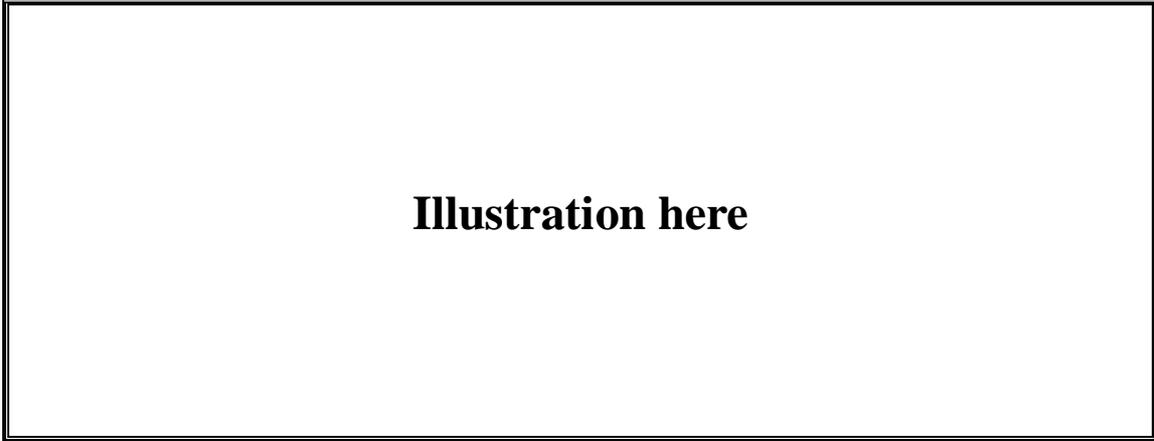
Some of these sayings may appear cryptic. If there are any you do not understand, ask around. Discuss them with your friends. Over time, your own experiences will confirm the truth of these sayings, and they will become engrained.

You may disagree with some of the sayings. That is good. It shows the brain is working. Argue over them, if that appeals to you. Improve them, if you can. Everything human is

capable of bettering. Let me know what you think. There may be further editions. Between us we can improve them.

CHAPTER ONE

You



You need to be right with other people.
You need to be right with yourself.

Don't waste your sweetness on the desert air
Or cast your pearls before swine.

Your body is a working factory, with wonderful processes
constantly going on.
Never be ashamed of any of those processes.

Keep your balance.
Don't throw your weight about.

Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves.
Remember that behind your back people are constantly running
you down.

Show what you stand for.
And what you won't stand for.

Don't be upset if people disagree with you.
You can't please everybody.

Push your luck.
Keep smiling.

Stand straight, walk tall.
In public, don't loll.

Know more today than you did yesterday.
Live and learn.

If you don't know, ask.
If there's no one to ask – look it up.

Be a good loser.
Be a good winner.

If misfortunate strikes, grin and bear it.
No one likes a whinger.

Don't make excuses.
Qui s'excuse s'accuse (he who excuses himself accuses himself).

Keep a journal.
Keep a promise.

You can't be right always.
Even Homer sometimes nods.

They say: Give a dog a bad name and hang him.
So protect your reputation.

Buy the best.
Or go without.

Learn to forgive.
Don't let the sun go down on your wrath.

Act bravely.
Even when you feel afraid.

Don't be a know all.
Never stop learning.

Don't be censorious.
Live and let live.

Don't be rowdy.
Empty cans make most noise.

Never gamble, never smoke.
Never give yourself to dope.

Know your virtues.
Build on them.

When you give, look for no return.
Never expect gratitude – then you might receive it.

Don't seek credit for your good deeds.
Virtue is its own reward.

If you do what you like, people may not like what you do.
If they don't like what you do, they may not like you.

Don't be a trouble-maker, looking for what he likes making.
Poor oil on troubled waters.

Master your passions.
They are your greatest enemy.

CHAPTER TWO

Your Life

Illustration here

When one door shuts, another one opens.
Alternative: When one door shuts, another one bangs you in the face (the Tommy Docherty version).

Do unto others as you would be done by.
Alternative: Do unto others before they do unto you (the W. C. Fields version).

You usually get one chance in life.
Every dog has his day.

Don't grudge a sprat to catch a whale.
What goes around comes around.

Don't proceed on inadequate information.
A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

The onlooker sees most of the game.
So consult an onlooker when you can.

Don't count on your plans working out.
Man proposes, God disposes.

Don't regret yesterday or worry about tomorrow.
No time like the present.

What's gone is foregone.
A mill cannot grind with the water that has passed.

What you lose on the swings you gain on the roundabouts.
Life's rewards and penalties even out in the end.

Have a firm handshake.
Look them in the eye.

Civility costs nothing.
Manners maketh man.

Moderation in all things.
Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re (smooth in method, strong at heart).

Learn quietness.
Softly, softly catchee monkey.

Many a mickle makes a muckle.
Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.

Money is power.
Who pays the piper calls the tune.

Don't despise money.
Money talks.

Don't only value what costs money.
The best things in life are free.

Don't despise waste.
Where there's muck there's brass.

Don't be deceived by the flashy.
All is not gold that glitters.

Never stake all on a single throw.
Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

You can't deny what is really there.
Face facts; they're stubborn things.

You can't escape notice.
More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows.

Trouble springs from little things.
The mother of mischief is no bigger than a gnat's wing.

If you have a problem, don't worsen it.
If you're in a hole, stop digging.

The desperate seize any chance.
A drowning match clutches at straws.

Don't expect to spend all your time with people like you.
It takes all sorts to make a world.

Don't pretend you are what you know you're not – you'll only be
found out.
Be what you seem to be.

Don't run people down.
They'll only do the same to you.

Don't swallow gudgeons before they're caught.
Or count your chickens before they're hatched.

Don't believe all you're told.
Doubt everything – even though the doubt is small.

People who say most rarely have most to say.
Don't say something when there is nothing to be said.

Don't have a row 'to clear the air'.
Least said soonest mended.

Be sensible and take precautions.
Better safe than sorry.

Leave well alone.
Let sleeping dogs lie.

Be prepared to cope with whatever prevails.
There's no bad weather, only the wrong clothes.

Every cloud has a silver lining.
It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

Don't wait for an opponent to strike.
Attack is the best form of defence.

Keep your eyes open.
Look before you leap.

Don't be afraid of admitting a mistake.
It only means you're wiser today than you were yesterday.

Live up to what you profess.
Handsome is as handsome does.

Let actions back up what you say.
Fine words butter no parsnips.

Never regret an experience you have had.
Only regret the ones you've missed.

One half of the world doesn't know how the other half lives.
When ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.

Sleep on it.
Other days bring other thoughts.

Distance lends enchantment to the view.
The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

The law pays no attention to trifles.
Be the same in your own affairs.

Hurry makes waste.
More haste less speed.

Don't expect perpetual sunshine.
Life isn't all beer and skittles.

Never give up.
While there's life there's hope.

All events have a cause.
Nothing comes of nothing.

Untouched things don't stay unchanged.
Nature abhors a vacuum.

Needs must when the devil drives.
Necessity is the mother of invention.

Smile in the face of disaster.
There's nothing so bad but it might have been worse.

Don't set everyone against you.
Divide and rule.

A fool one way, a fool any way.
To a blind horse, a nod's as good as a wink.

Don't lament your mistakes – learn from them.
Learn from the mistakes of others – whenever committed.

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.
What you get from a pig is a grunt.

Don't linger over deciding to give.
He gives twice who gives quickly.

Small arms, small weight.
If you want peace, prepare for a fight.

Credit always runs out in the end.
After the feast comes the reckoning.

Defer gratification.
You can't have your cake and eat it.

Overeating lessens pleasure.
Enough is as good as a feast.

No one can tell you how to live your life.
It is for you to decide what ends to pursue.

Make the best of things.
If life hands you lemons, make lemonade.

Love many, trust few.
Always paddle your own canoe.

Await your fate.
The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.

You can't escape the inevitable.
What will be, will be (*che sera sera*).

The fatal blow may strike at any time.
Call no man happy till he dies.

Death is the great leveller.
When the game is over, queen and pawn go back into the same box.

CHAPTER THREE

Your Home

Illustration here

Be neat and tidy.
Even though Beethoven wasn't.

Refill the ice tray.
Be good around the house.

Put the cap back on the toothpaste.
Wash round the bath when you leave it.

Don't leave towels on the floor.
Let out the steam.

Don't let dirt build on your razor.
Cleanliness is next to godliness.

Don't use anti-perspirant to disguise a missed bath.
Don't use anti-perspirant.

Leave talcum powder for the girls.
Forget the after-shave.

Don't whiten your teeth – they're meant to look like bone.
But do floss them.

Don't leave the seat up.
If you finish the roll replace it.

Bodily functions are natural and normal – not funny.
But it's civilised to keep them private and unobtrusive.

Plan a fire drill – and practise it.
Check the smoke alarms.

Fragile things are made to be broken.
The cracked pitcher goes most often to the well.

What's done is done.
It's no use crying over spilt milk.

Use the good silver.
Never mind the Joneses.

Don't use television as wallpaper.
Boycott sponsors of rotten programmes

Don't argue over likes and dislikes.
There's no accounting for tastes.

Pay your bills as they come in.
Remember birthdays.

Give TLC (tender loving care) to your loved ones.
Don't be a street angel and a house devil.

Never get on bad terms with those around you – you can't escape them.
Good fences make good neighbours.

Don't do the dirty in your own backyard.
It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest.

CHAPTER FOUR
Your Work

Illustration here

Wake up looking forward to the day.
If you don't, something's wrong.

The reasonable adapt to the world, the unreasonable adapt the
world to themselves.
Progress depends on the unreasonable.

Choose work you like doing, though it pays less.
Learn the trade, not the tricks of the trade.

Acquire starting capital, however small.
Money makes money.

Don't be afraid to make a start.
There's a first time for everything.

Learn to be versatile.
When all you've got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

But do learn some skill properly.
Don't be a Jack of all trades and master of none.

Don't set your hopes unrealistically high.
Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be
disappointed.

New brooms sweep clean.
First impressions count.

Don't kick over the traces.
The first duty of a soldier is obedience.

Get there before the others.
The early bird catches the worm.

Don't talk about it – do it.
Actions speak louder than words.

Watch for openings.
When opportunity knocks – answer quickly.

Try to be there, or you'll be blamed because you can't answer.
The one who is absent is always in the wrong.

Don't move to stage two before you've secured stage one.
Catch your hare before you start cooking it.

Admit fault when you are at fault.
A bad workman always blames his tools.

Confess your mistakes.
The person who never made a mistake never made anything.

Learn to delegate.
Why keep a dog and bark yourself?

Don't pass the buck.
Let it stop with you.

If you challenge the boss be ready to go through with it.
Who draws his sword against the prince will not need the scabbard again.

You don't have all the time in the world.
Everything human comes to an end.

Many hands make light work.
But too many cooks spoil the broth.

Investigate before you act.
Forewarned is forearmed.

Make sure the work is needed before you start on it.
If it ain't broke don't fix it.

Read before you sign.
The devil's in the detail.

Consult before deciding.
Two heads are better than one.

Take time to consider.
Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

To delay in deciding may be itself to decide.
In the long run time settles all.

If you insert rubbish, rubbish will result.
Garbage in, garbage out (GIGO).

Don't run needless risks.
It's best to be on the safe side

Get another person to do a job that concerns you intimately.
The lawyer who acts for himself has a fool for a client.

Don't pay up too quickly or commit too early.
Pay beforehand was never well served.

Always pay what the job is worth.
If you pay peanuts you get monkeys.

Poachers make the best gamekeepers.
It takes one to know one.

Be alert to help from unexpected sources.
Even a fool may give a wise man counsel.

It pays to be patient.
All things come to them who wait.

If you need to change a system, choose the right time.
Don't swap horses in mid-stream.

If you try for more than is within your capacity, you may fail
altogether.
The best is the enemy of the good.

It takes only a drop to spill a full cup.
The final straw breaks the camel's back.

When you're up against it, don't be fussy about the solution.
Any port in a storm.

Don't abandon an enterprise because you're behind time.
Better late than never.

Don't assume success when you're finalising a deal.
Full cup, steady hand.

Be prepared to tough it out.
When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

If the going gets too tough, you're in the wrong league.
If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen.

You'll get what you sweat.
The age of miracles is past.

Don't rejoice too soon.
Who laughs last laughs longest.

Get the job done, and then go out to play.
Business before pleasure.

Don't be a workaholic.
All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

Don't be proud that you *nearly* brought it off.
A miss is as good as a mile.

Never forget Murphy's law.
If anything can go wrong, it will.

Service is the best advertisement.
The customer is always right.

Who gets to the mill before others should grind before others.
First come first served.

Look for ulterior motives.
There's no such thing as a free lunch.

Get your priorities right.
First things first.

Be on time.
While you keep someone waiting they'll dwell on your faults.

Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.
Procrastination is the thief of time.

It may be wiser to consolidate than go after more.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Make sure each job is allocated to someone.
Everyone's business is no one's business.

Pick the right person for the particular job.
Horses for courses.

Trust your subordinates.
But remember that when the cat's away the mice will play.

Put limits on your trust.
Every man has his price.

Insist on a loyal workforce.
No man can serve two masters.

Weed out the worst team members.
A chain is as strong as its weakest link.

You can't teach people to be what by nature they are not.
You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

You can drive out nature with a pitchfork but she will always
come back.
A leopard cannot change his spots.

If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well.
Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar.

Seize the chance – you may not get another.
Make hay while the sun shines.

Some workers despise an opportunity.
You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

Don't be ageist when choosing staff.
Many a good tune is played on an old fiddle.

Don't begrudge staff a holiday.
It's a poor heart that never rejoices.

Friends and Companions

Illustration here

You are known by the company you keep.
Birds of a feather flock together.

Keep your friendships in good repair.
Never borrow money from a mate.

Don't presume on a friendship.
Friends are lost by calculation.

Every week contact a friend.
Give surprise presents.

Don't take anyone for granted.
You never miss the water till the well runs dry.

Be kind to your own kind.
Dog doesn't eat dog.

Live with a person to know them.
Know them to understand them.

Never give up on a person.
There's good in everyone.

Don't bicker.
Watch your temper.

Strive for each person's goodwill.
With each one, you only have so much goodwill to use up.

Never dispute with an angry friend.
A soft answer turns away wrath.

Return a favour.
One good turn deserves another.

Don't be shy.
At a party, work the room.

Hold your liquor.
Stand your round.

Make sure you're not a bore.
Take care to be aware.

Don't love the sound of your own voice.
Listen to people.

Don't outstay your welcome.
Fish and guests stink after three days.

Need is the test of friendship.
A friend in need is a friend indeed.

Praise more than you blame.
Don't damn with faint praise.

Respect the homes of others.
You need permission to poke a man's fire.

Loving and Liking

Illustration here

None but the brave deserve the fair.
Faint heart never won fair lady.

You can only love one person.
You can only drink from one glass.

Show you're romantic, but avoid complications.
Better be off with the old love before you are on with the new.

Don't repine at a rebuff.
There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.

Don't take the looks for the nature.
Beauty is only skin deep.

Don't expect too much of people.
The best of men are but men at best.

Say a special thing to your lover.
We are cut from the same cloth, and must be fashioned into one garment.

When you love, make sure you're not deceiving yourself.
Love is blind.

In maturity or later, don't fear women will abandon you.
Better an old man's darling than a young man's slave.

Love is a flame; and like all flames can go out.
The tragedy of life is not that we perish, but that we cease to love.

Family and Marriage

Illustration here

Look after your own.
Near is my shirt; but nearer is my skin (*plus pres m'est char que n'est chemise*).

You can't divorce your mother.
But you can get a separation.

A boy's best friend is his mother.
A man's best friend is his wife.

Show you're sincere - marry the girl.
Be ever faithful, ever true.

When you marry, work at it.
There are more things to marriage than four bare legs in a bed.

Marry in haste, repent at leisure.
Only a silly man chooses a silly wife.

It is difficult for one spouse to be morally higher than the other.
A good Jack makes a good Jill.

A father becomes one by courtesy of the mother.
It's a wise child that knows its own father.

Never despise a child.
Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings many a truth comes.

Experts neglect their personal concerns.
The cobbler's children are worst shod.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Morality, Religion and Belief

Illustration here

Virtues are habits.

A habit of not thinking a thing wrong may get you thinking it right.

Never do evil that good may come of it.
The end does not justify the means.

Respect your sexuality.
Achieve fulfilment without hurting others.

There's no freewill in sexual orientation.
What matters is what makes you twitch.

Never feel guilty about sex.
Unless you have harmed someone else.

Be kind.

Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

Be helpful.

If you're not part of the solution, you may be part of the problem.

Stay cool.

If you lose your temper you lose control.

Never get into a blind rage.

Or cut off your nose to spite your face.

Don't fly off the handle at an insult.

Revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

Criticism does not deter the determined.
The dogs bark, but the caravan passes.

Gratitude follows a present.
Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Don't repine if you can't have it all.
Half a loaf is better than no bread.

Contract your wants, though you live on a barren heath.
What you never had you never miss.

Don't do unto others as you would they should do unto you.
One man's meat is another man's poison.

Don't be greedy.
Much would have more.

Return what you borrow.
Don't be generous with what belongs to others.

If you cheat the taxman you're robbing your friends.
Cheats never prosper.

Don't blame a fault you have yourself.
People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Don't raise expectations you could never satisfy.
Hope deferred makes the heart sick.

Serves you right if you get things wrong.
As you make your bed you must lie on it.

Keep on keeping on.
It's dogged as does it.

You can't win 'em all.
You can't even fight 'em all.

Don't swear – even when it slips out.
Don't blaspheme – even if you don't believe.

Don't pretend to understand the Universe—it's bigger than you are.
Our perception of things is only as good as our perceptive apparatus.

Man is not made in God's image.
Man has made God in his image.

Never be fanatical.
It shuts out truth.

But you need something to live by.
Atheism is faith in nothing.

Humans are programmed to seek God.
Who searches for God has already found Him.

Man proposes.
God disposes.

Postlude

Like sound-bites, the sayings set out above are highly concentrated. They do not take up much space on the paper, but they would take up a lot of space if their meanings were fully spelt out. The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, to which I am indebted, does a lot of this spelling out. For example in relation to Spare the rod and spoil the child, a proverb I have not reproduced, it tells of many instances of its use, the first being that in around 1000 AD Aelfric said that if a father 'sparath his gyrde' he 'hatath his cild'. That view is not common today, which reminds us that some proverbs, though not many, have become obsolete with time.

So there you are. The secrets of avoiding mistakes. I wonder what you think of them. Not much perhaps, or possibly you are more perceptive than that. Perhaps you will not end up like my old friend Harry, who never would take advice. And now look at him. Very unhappy in old age is Harry, because he admits he has always been feckless. That's a good word for you to consider, a good Old English word you might think. In fact it's Scottish dialect.

Feckless Harry is in the condition at sixty-two that the majority of British people are in, and like Harry have been in all their adult lives. They are either in debt or penniless. They never save a penny, so have nothing in reserve to meet contingencies. If the unexpected happens, they are caught out. Paid weekly on Fridays, they have nothing left by Tuesday so each week have to borrow or pawn something to survive until payday. They live their whole lives in that uncomfortable way, when the easy thing would have been to attend to some of the sayings I have set out in this book. Saving bit by bit is not difficult, if you put your mind to it. Many a mickle makes a muckle.

But there, this book is probably a waste of time. The final proverb I will quote dates from 1591-

You can't put an old head on young shoulders.

I do hope some at least of my young readers will prove this hoary saying to be mistaken. I have found these principles helpful in my own life. I hope they will do the same for you.

No, perhaps I should leave you with a different thought. There are other things than proverbs. There is exhortation. I will say goodbye and good luck with the following exhortation from Winston Churchill, written in his book *My Early Life* when he was in his mid-fifties-

Come on now, all you young men, all over the world. You have not an hour to lose. You must take your places in life's fighting line. Twenty to twenty-five! These are the years! Don't be content with things as they are. 'The earth is yours and the fullness thereof.' Enter upon your inheritance, accept your responsibilities. Raise the glorious flags again, advance them upon new enemies, who constantly gather upon the front of the human army, and have only to be assaulted to be overthrown. Don't take No for an answer. Never submit to failure. Do not be fobbed off by mere personal success or acceptance. You will make all kinds of mistakes . . .

Which is where we came in.