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SAFAR NAMEH, PERSIAN
PICTURES

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Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell

Safar Nameh, Persian Pictures / A Book Of Travel

AN EASTERN CITY

The modern capital of Persia lies in a plain ringed half-way round by mountains, which on the northern side touch with frozen summits the regions of eternal snow, and on the east sink into low ranges of hills, stretching their naked arms into the desert. It is the chief city of a land of dust and stones – waste and desolate, Persia unfolds her monotonous length, broken only by ridges of hills even more barren than the plain itself, southward from the gates of Tehran. There is a certain fine simplicity in a landscape from which the element of water, with all the varied life it brings in its murmuring train, is entirely absent. The empty world looks like a great room cleared for the reception of some splendid company; presently it will be filled by a vast pageant of men or angels: their lance-heads will flash back the dazzling rays of the sun, their banners will float out many-coloured against the sombre background, the peal of their trumpets will re-echo from mountain to mountain. But no! day after day rises upon the same silence, the same solitude, and at length the watcher turns away impatiently, with the conviction that he has been gazing with futile expectation upon the changeless features of the dead. The pageant has long since swept over the land – swept onward. Mother of human energies, strewn with the ruins of a Titanic past, Persia has slipped out of the vivid world, and the simplicity of her landscape is the fine simplicity of death. ‘Alas, poor Yorick!’ says Hamlet, yielding, in an exceptionally unpremeditated moment, the natural tribute of pity from the living to the dead. Persia in such an aspect may be pitiful enough, but it is not admirable.

To the north of Tehran, however, the lower slopes of the Shimran range are clothed with gardens and cornfields, as though the dense vegetation which, by a strange freak of nature, stretches its belt of green along the southern shore of the Caspian, between the shifting sands of the Oxus and the black, naphtha-saturated earth of Baku, had sent its roots through the very heart of the mountains and found a foothold for its irrepressible luxuriance even among dust and stones. The capital itself, as you approach it from the west, presents the appearance of a wood rather than of a city – nor minaret, nor tower, nor dome forms a landmark above it, the trees of its gardens conceal its stunted buildings, and it is not until the traveller finds himself under its very walls that he can say, ‘Here is Tehran!’ It owes its life to the snow mountains, from whence its water flows; the ground between them and the town is undermined by a network of passages, vaulted over with stone, and ventilated by air-holes at intervals of about fifty yards, each hole being protected by a mound of earth. Within, these arteries of the city are the width of a man’s shoulders, and scarcely high enough to allow him to walk upright; he stumbles, knee-deep in water, along the uneven bed, bending himself double where the vault drops lower, squeezing past narrow corners cut out of the solid rock. On either side black apertures open into more passages, bringing in tributary streams from right and leftward, and at intervals the darkness is broken by the ray of sunlight which strikes through one of the air-holes, burying itself, like an ill-directed spear, deep into the earth. No other form of irrigation remains, no storage of water, in a country where these arts were probably familiar to the far larger population which dwelt in former ages at the foot of the mountains. The present system is clumsy and laborious. Constant watchfulness is needed to keep the Kanats from falling into disrepair and from becoming blocked by masses of roots, and if this were to be relaxed, Tehran would in a few years cease to exist.

To what merit it owes its position of capital remains a mystery. It is the seat of no native industry; arid deserts and narrow mountain-passes, traversed only by caravans of mules, cut it off from all

convenient intercourse with the west. Isfahan is invested with the traditions of a former importance; about Shiraz linger the vestiges of a still mightier antiquity; Casvin lies a hundred miles nearer to the Caspian; Tehran is only a modern seat of government called to importance by the arbitrary will of the present race of sovereigns.

Many gates lead into the city, breaking the level of the mud walls, with their arches and turrets, which are decorated with tiles of faïence set into patterns and pictures and inscriptions. The space enclosed by the walls is a large one, but it is not by any means filled with houses. Passing through one of the western gateways, you will find yourself at first in desolate tracts of sand, stretching between unfinished or ruined buildings; occasionally the open doorway in a long mud wall will reveal to you a luxuriant garden full of tanks and fountains and flower-beds, under whose plane-trees stands the house of some rich man who can afford himself a weekly sufficiency of water to turn the wilderness into fertile pleasure-grounds; further on you will come upon wide streets, very empty and silent, fringed by low, mud-built houses; gradually the streets narrow, the sloping counters of shops present their wares to the passers-by: fruit and vegetables, and the broad thin flaps of Persian bread; here and there a European shop-window, behind which the goods are more miscellaneous than tempting; here and there the frontage of some Government building, with a doorway gaily patterned in coloured bricks. As the streets grow narrower, they become more crowded. A kaleidoscopic world of unfamiliar figures passes to and fro beneath the white mulberry-trees which spring out between the cobble stones of the pavement: grave elders holding their cloaks discreetly round them, dervishes with a loincloth about their waists, and a brilliant scarf bound over their ragged locks, women enveloped from head to foot in loose black garments, a linen veil hanging over their faces, and making them look like the members of some strange religious order, negro slaves and white-robed Arabs, beggars and loiterers, and troops of children pressing in and out between the horsemen and the carriages. Sometimes a beggar will accost you – a woman, perhaps, drawing aside a corner of her veil and imploring alms in a sweet high voice. If you turn a deaf ear to her prayers, she will invoke curses on your head, but a copper coin will purchase you every blessing known to man, including the disappearance of the lady in question, who would otherwise have followed you with unblushing persistence, shouting, ‘Pul! pul! pul!’ – Money! money! money! – in your ear.

At a street corner a group of soldiers are shaking the branches of a mulberry-tree, and eagerly devouring the sickly fruit which falls into the dust at their feet. Judging from the appearance of the Persian army, a foreigner would be tempted to conclude that it subsisted entirely upon white mulberries, and was reduced to a state of starvation when the summer was over. The hands of paymasters are adhesive in the East: but a small proportion of his earnings reaches the common soldier, and mulberries, flavoured with dust, have at least the merit of furnishing him with an inexpensive meal. His outward man is not calculated to inspire much alarm in the breast of his enemies. His gait is slouching, his uniform torn and discoloured; not infrequently he wears his shirt outside his trousers, and the ragged flounce of brownish-gray linen hanging below his tunic lends him an air anything but martial. His temperament seems to be childlike and peaceable in the extreme. He amuses himself while he is on guard with foolish games, constructing, for instance, a water-mill of tiny wheels, which the stream in front of the palace will set a-turning, and whose movement will delight his eyes as he passes up and down. It is even related (and the tale is scarcely past credence) that on a certain occasion when a person of importance was visiting a southern fortress, he found one of the men who guarded the gateway engaged in knitting stockings, and the other turning an honest penny by the sale of apples. Nevertheless, the Shah is proud of his army. He spends happy hours devising new uniforms for his men – uniforms which are the strangest jumble of European reminiscences and an Oriental love of bright colour.

Bearing towards the north-eastern quarter of the city, you will enter a broad square which is looked upon as the ne plus ultra of municipal magnificence. It is here that the Shah causes his part in the annual Feast of Sacrifice to be performed, and here the inhabitants of Tehran assemble in great

numbers to witness the slaughter of a camel by the mollahs, in token that his Majesty has not forgotten, amid the cares of State, how Abraham bound Ishmael upon the altar (for the Mohammedans assert that it was the son of Hagar who was the hero of the legend) in obedience to the command of God. Immediately after the camel has fallen he is cut up by the knives of the mollahs, and the nearest bystanders, pouncing upon some portion of the victim, make off with it at full speed to the palace, where the first comer receives a large reward.

It must be confessed that, in spite of its size, the square makes no favourable impression upon the mind of the sophisticated European. The gates leading into it are adorned with ugly modern tiles, the buildings round it lack all trace of architectural merit. Their stucco face is questionably embellished by a fresco of lions, exceedingly ill drawn, each animal looking nervously round at the sun disc with its spiked circle of rays, which rises from behind its shoulders. Nor does it contain any press of human activity to atone for its lack of beauty. About the gate which leads into the Ark, where the palace is situated, there are indeed some signs of life – groups of soldiers are diversified by the figures of servants of the palace, clad in brilliant scarlet uniforms, and mounted on horses wearing bits and collars of solid silver, and by the fantastic liveries of the Shah's runners, whose dress closely resembles that which is depicted on a court-card, and whose headgear partakes equally of the nature of a beadle's and of a jester's; but for the rest this square is comparatively empty, and the wind sweeps the dust-clouds round the park of antiquated cannon which stands in its midst.

More narrow, squalid streets bring you to the bazaar, where, though little really beautiful or precious is to be found, the thronging Oriental life is in itself an endless source of delight. Ride through it on a summer morning, when its vaulted coolness will offer you a grateful shelter from the sun, and before its activity has been hushed by the heat of mid-day. In the shadow of the entrance there stands a small merchant, posted on the doorstep like an emblem of Oriental commerce – a solemn, long-robed child, so little that his mother's heart must have ached when she trusted the dear turbaned head out of her sight. This morsel of humanity has brought some bunches of flowers to sell, and has spread them out on a large stone in front of him. In his improvised shop he stands, motionless and imperturbable, watching the comers and goers, and waiting in dignified patience till one of them shall pause and buy. Wish him good luck under your breath (for he would resent the blessings of unbelievers), and pass on beneath the dark arches of the bazaar.

Here, at any rate, is bustle enough; trains of laden mules and donkeys shoulder your horse into the gutter, paying small heed to your cries of 'Avardah!' – Make room! – skilful housewives block the narrow way, driving hard bargains under the protection of their veils; groups of hungry men cluster round the roasters of kabobs, anxiously awaiting a breakfast. The shopkeepers alone are unmoved by the universal haste, but sit cross-legged among their wares, smoking the morning kalyan. On either side of the street arched doorways lead into caravanseries and high market-places. In one of them the sellers of cotton goods have established themselves, their counters laden with piles of cheap printed stuffs, bearing the Manchester stamp in one corner; next door is the booksellers' court, and a certain air of scholastic leisure pervades it; here are a row of fruit-shops, where the blue earthenware bowls of curds stand among heaped-up grapes and melons; there you may buy narrow-necked bottles of rosewater; further on you find yourself in a street of metal-workers, where the bright mule-bells hang in festoons over the counters; round the next corner the fires of smithies gleam on half-naked figures, labouring with strained muscles at their anvils. The whole bazaar resounds with talk, with the cries of the mule-drivers, the tinkling bells of the caravans, and the blows of the smiths' hammers. The air is permeated with the curious smell, half musty, half aromatic, of fruits and frying meats, merchandise and crowded humanity. The light comes from the top through a round hole in each of the countless tiny domes of the roof; through each hole falls a shaft of brilliant sunshine, cutting the surrounding darkness like a sword, and striking the hurrying multitude in successive flashes, white turban and bright-coloured robe gleaming – fading, gleaming – fading, in an endless sequence of sun and shadow, as their wearers pass to and fro.

So you may ride through street after narrow crooked street till your ears are full of sound, and your eyes of colour, and your mind of restless life, and before you have had time to recover your composure, you will find yourself in the sunny square, filled with stacks of hay, and tenanted by disbanded armies of mules, which lies within the Meshed Gate. Here, too, the town is afoot. Like a swarm of bees the people jostle one another through the archway. Peasants are driving in their donkeys laden with roped bundles of grass from the meadows of Shah Abdul Azim, strings of camels file through the gate, bringing in the produce of the great cities of the south and east, busy officials are hurrying Tehranwards in the early morning about their affairs, sellers of salted nuts have established themselves under the trees, beggars are lying by the roadside, pilgrims returning from Meshed hasten their step as the homeward goal comes into sight.

With the impression of the deserted western roads still fresh in your memory, the appearance of the bazaars and of this eastern gate will fill you with surprise. Tehran, which from the west looked almost like a city of the dead, cut off from intercourse with the outer world, is alive after all and in eager relationship with a world of its own. Here in the dust and the sunshine is an epitome of the living East, and standing unnoticed in such a doorway, you will admit that you have not travelled in vain. But as the wonderful procession of people files past you, too intent upon their own affairs to give you more than a contemptuous glance, you will realize what a gulf lies between you. The East looks to itself; it knows nothing of the greater world, of which you are a citizen, asks nothing of you and of your civilization.

THE TOWER OF SILENCE

Hundreds of years ago, when the Persian race first issued from unknown Bactria and the grim Hyrcanian forests, passing through the Caspian Gates, they came upon a fertile land lying to the north-east of the country, which was subsequently named Media. There on the edge of the province known to-day as Khorasan they founded a city, which with the rolling centuries gathered greatness and riches and power; the Greeks (for her fame had penetrated to the limits of the civilized world) called her Rages. Key to Hyrcania and Parthia, the geographical position of the Median city lent her considerable importance. The Jews knew her well: in Rages dwelt that Gabelus to whom the pious Tobit entrusted his ten talents of silver in the days of the Captivity; there Tobias was journeying when the angel Raphael met him and instructed him in the healing properties of fishes; there, relates the author of the Book of Judith, reigned Phraortes whom Nebuchadnezzar smote through with his darts and utterly destroyed.

Rages, the Ancient of Days, passed through many vicissitudes of fortune in the course of her long-drawn life. Under her walls fled the last Darius when Alexander's army chased him, vanquished at Arbela, over the wide plains of Khorasan – fled to the mountains of the Caspian to seek a luckless fate at the hands of the cruel Bactrian satrap. At Rages, perhaps, the generous Alexander mourned the untimely death of his rival, from her palaces hurled his vengeance against Bessus, and saw the satrap dragged a captive to execution. Twice the city was destroyed, by earthquake and by Parthian invaders, twice to rise up afresh under new names. At length, in the twelfth century, an enemy more devastating than the Parthian hordes, more vindictive than the earthquake, swept over pleasant Khorasan and turned the fertile province into the wilderness it is to this day. Tartars from the uttermost ends of the earth left no stone of Rages standing, and the great Median city vanished from the history of men. A few miles to the north-east Tehran has sprung up to be the capital of modern Persia – a Persia to whom the glorious traditions of the past are as forgotten as the strength of Phraortes' walls. 'The Lion and the Lizard keep the courts where Jemshyd gloried and drank deep,' but the foundations of Rages, the mother of Persian cities, can be traced only by conjecture.

Through waste and solitary places we rode one morning to the city and the citadel of the dead. It was still so early that the sun had not overtopped the range of eastern mountains. We rode out of sleeping Tehran, and took our way along the deserted track that skirts its walls; to our left lay the wilderness, wrapped in transparent shadow, and sloping gradually upwards to the barren foot-hills over which winds the road to Meshed. Before we had gone far, with a flash and a sudden glitter, the sun leapt up above the snow-peaks, and day rushed across the plain – day, crude and garish, revealing not the bounteous plenty of the cornfields and pastures which encircled Rages, but dust and stones and desert scrub, and the naked, forbidding mountains, wrinkled by many winters.

To us, with the headlong flight of Darius and the triumph of the conqueror surging before our eyes, the broken ground round the site of the ancient stronghold piled itself into ruined turret and rampart, sank into half-obliterated fosse and ditch. Where we imagined the walls to have been, we discovered a solid piece of masonry, and our minds reeled at the thought that it was wildly possible Alexander's eyes might have rested on this even brickwork. Time has made gates in the battlements, but the desert has not even yet established unquestioned rule within them. At the foot of the wall we came upon a living pool lying under the shadow of a plane-tree. Round such a pool the sick men of Bethsaida gathered and waited for the stirring of the waters, but in Rages all was solitude, 'and the desired angel came no more.'

Towards the east two parallel lines of hills rear themselves out of the desert, dividing it from the wider stretch of desert that reaches southward to Isfahan. Between the hills lies a stony valley, up which we turned our steps, and which led us to the heart of desolation and the end of all things. Half-way up the hillside stands a tower, whose whitewashed wall is a landmark to all the country round.

Even from the far distant peaks of the opposite mountains, the Tower of Silence is visible, a mocking gleam reminding the living of the vanity of their eager days. For the tower is the first stage in the weary journey of the dead; here they come to throw off the mantle of the flesh before their bones may rest in the earth without fear of defiling the holy element, before their souls, passing through the seven gates of the planets, may reach the sacred fire of the sun.

The tower is roofless; within, ten or twelve feet below the upper surface of its wall, is a chalky platform on which the dead bodies lie till sun and vultures have devoured them. This grim turret-room was untenanted. Zoroaster's religion has faded from that Media where once it reigned, and few and humble now are the worshippers who raise prayers to Ormuzd under the open heaven, and whose bodies are borne up the stony valley and cast into the Tower of Silence.

We dismounted from our horses and sat down on the hillside. The plain stretched below us like a monotonous ocean which had billowed up against the mountain flanks and had been fixed there for ever; we could see the feet of the mountains themselves planted firmly in the waves of dust, and their glistening peaks towering into the cloudless sky; the very bones of the naked earth were exposed before us, and the fashion of its making was revealed.

With the silence of an extinct world still heavy upon us, we made our way to the upper end of the valley, but at the gates of the plain Life came surging to meet us. A wild hollyhock stood sentinel among the stones; it had spread some of its yellow petals for banner, and on its uplifted spears the buds were fat and creamy with coming bloom. Rain had fallen in the night, and had called the wilderness itself to life, clothing its thorns with a purple garment of tiny flowers; the delicious sun struck upon our shoulders; a joyful little wind blew the damp, sweet smell of the reviving earth in gusts towards us; our horses sniffed the air and, catching the infection of the moment, tugged at the bit and set off at racing speed across the rain-softened ground. And we, too, passed out of the silence and remembered that we lived. Life seized us and inspired us with a mad sense of revelry. The humming wind and the teeming earth shouted 'Life! life!' as we rode. Life! life! the bountiful, the magnificent! Age was far from us – death far; we had left him enthroned in his barren mountains, with ghostly cities and outworn faiths to bear him company. For us the wide plain and the limitless world, for us the beauty and the freshness of the morning, for us youth and the joy of living!

IN PRAISE OF GARDENS

There is a couplet in an Elizabethan book of airs which might serve as a motto for Eastern life: 'Thy love is not thy love,' says the author of the songs in the 'Muses' Garden of Delights' (and the pretty stilted title suits the somewhat antiquated ring of the lines):

'Thy love is not thy love if not thine own,
And so it is not, if it once be known.'

If it once be known! Ah yes! the whole charm of possession vanishes before the gaze of curious eyes, and for them, too, charm is driven away by familiarity. It takes the mystery of a Sphinx to keep the world gazing for thirty centuries. The East is full of secrets – no one understands their value better than the Oriental; and because she is full of secrets she is full of entrancing surprises. Many fine things there are upon the surface: brilliance of colour, splendour of light, solemn loneliness, clamorous activity; these are only the patterns upon the curtain which floats for ever before the recesses of Eastern life, its essential charm is of more subtle quality. As it listeth, it comes and goes; it flashes upon you through the open doorway of some blank, windowless house you pass in the street, from under the lifted veil of the beggar woman who lays her hand on your bridle, from the dark, contemptuous eyes of a child; then the East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of her jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face, but while you are wondering whether she be angel or devil, she is gone.

She will not stay – she prefers the unexpected; she will keep her secrets and her tantalizing charm with them, and when you think you have caught at last some of her illusive grace, she will send you back to shrouded figures and blank house-fronts.

You must be content to wait, and perhaps some day, when you find her walking in her gardens in the cool of the evening, she will take a whim to stop and speak to you, and you will go away fascinated by her courteous words and her exquisite hospitality.

For it is in her gardens that she is most herself – they share her charm, they are as unexpected as she. Conceive on every side such a landscape as the dead world will exhibit when it whirls naked and deserted through the starry interspace – a gray and featureless plain, over which the dust-clouds rise and fall, build themselves into mighty columns, and sink back again among the stones at the bidding of hot and fitful winds; prickly low-growing plants for all vegetation, leafless, with a foliage of thorns; white patches of salt, on which the sunlight glitters; a fringe of barren mountains on the horizon... Yet in this desolation lurks the mocking beauty of the East. A little water and the desert breaks into flower, bowers of cool shade spring up in the midst of dust and glare, radiant stretches of soft colour gleam in that gray expanse. Your heart leaps as you pass through the gateway in the mud wall; so sharp is the contrast, that you may stand with one foot in an arid wilderness and the other in a shadowy, flowery paradise. Under the broad thick leaves of the plane-trees tiny streams murmur, fountains splash with a sweet fresh sound, white-rose bushes drop their fragrant petals into tanks, lying deep and still like patches of concentrated shadow. The indescribable charm of a Persian garden is keenly present to the Persians themselves – the 'strip of herbage strown, which just divides the desert from the sown,' an endlessly beautiful parable. Their poets sing the praise of gardens in exquisite verses, and call their books by their names. I fear the Muses have wandered more often in Sa'di's Garden of Roses than in the somewhat pretentious pleasure-ground which our Elizabethan writer prepared for them.

The desert about Tehran is renowned for the beauty of its gardens. The Shah possesses several, others belong to his sons, others to powerful ministers and wealthy merchants. Sometimes across the

gateways a chain is drawn, denoting that the garden is Bast – sanctuary – and into these the European may not go; but places of refuge for the hunted criminal are, fortunately, few, and generally the garden is open to all comers.

Perhaps the most beautiful of all is one which belongs to the Shah, and which lies under a rocky hillock crowned with the walls and towers of a palace. We found ourselves at its gate one evening, after an aimless canter across the desert, and determined to enter. The loiterers in the gateway let us pass through unchallenged. We crossed the little entrance-court and came into a long dark avenue, fountains down the middle of it, and flower-beds, in which the plants were pale and meagre for want of light; roses, the pink flowers which scent the rosewater, and briars, a froth of white and yellow bloom, growing along its edges in spite of the deep shade of the plane-trees. Every tiny rill of water was fringed with violet leaves – you can imagine how in the spring the scent of the violets greets you out in the desert when you are still far away, like a hospitable friend coming open-armed down his steps to welcome you. We wandered along intersecting avenues, until we came to one broader than the rest, at the end of which stood a little house. Tiny streams flowed round and about it, flowed under its walls and into its rooms; fountains splashed ceaselessly in front of it, a soft light wind swayed the heavy folds of the patterned curtains hanging half-way down across its deep balconies. The little dwelling looked like a fairy palace, jewelled with coloured tiles, unreal and fantastic, built half out of the ripple of water, and half out of the shadowy floating of its great curtains. Two or three steps and a narrow passage, and we were in the central room – such a room to lie and dream in through the hot summer days! – tiled with blue, in the middle an overflowing fountain, windows on either side opening down to the ground, the vaulted ceiling and the alcoved walls set with a mosaic of looking-glass, in whose diamonds and crescents the blue of the tiles and the spray of the tossing waters were reflected.

As we sat on the deep step of the windowsill, a door opened softly, and a long-robed Persian entered. He carried in his hand a twanging stringed instrument, with which he established himself at the further side of the fountain, and began to play weird, tuneless melodies on its feeble strings – an endless, wailing minor. Evening fell, and the dusk gathered in the glittering room, the fountain bubbled lower and sank into silence, the wind blew the sweet smell of roses in to us where we sat – and still the Persian played, while in the garden the nightingales called to one another with soft thrilling notes.

A week or two later we came back to Doshan Tepe. This time we found it peopled by a party of Persians. They were sitting round the edge of one of the tanks at the end of the avenue, men and little children, and in their green and yellow robes they looked to us as we entered like a patch of brilliant water-plants, whose vivid colours were not to be dimmed by the shade of the plane leaves. But the musician did not reappear; he was too wise a magician to weave his spells 'save to the span of heaven and few ears.'

There was a deserted garden at the foot of the mountains which had a curious history. It belonged to the Zil es Sultan, the Shah's eldest son, who had inherited it from his mother, that Schöne Müllerin whose beauty captivated the King of Kings in the days of his youth. The Zil (his title, being interpreted, signifies 'The shadow of the King') has fallen into disgrace. The Shah casts his shadow far, and in order that it may never grow less, the Zil is not allowed to move from Isfahan; his Shimran garden therefore is empty, and his house is falling into disrepair. It stands on the edge of a rushing mountain torrent, which, we will hope, turned the mill-wheels in old days (though some men assert that the girl was not a miller's daughter, after all), and it boasts some magnificent plane-trees, under which we picnicked one evening, hanging Persian lanterns from the boughs. The night had brought tall yellow evening primroses into flower, and their delicious smell mingled with that of the jessamine, which covered the decaying walls. The light of our lanterns shone on the smooth tree trunks, between the leaves glimmered a waning moon, and behind us the mountain-sides lay in sheets of light. We did not envy the Zil his palaces in Isfahan.

Once in another garden we found the owner at home. It was early in the morning; he was standing on his doorstep, judging between the differences of two people of his village, a man and a veiled woman, who had come to seek his arbitration. They were both talking loudly, she with shrill exclamations and calls upon God to witness, in her eagerness forgetting the laws of modesty, and throwing aside her thick linen veil, that she might plead with eyes and expression, as well as voice – or perhaps it was policy, for she had a beautiful face, dark-eyed and pale, round which the folds of black cloak and white linen fell like the drapery round the head of a Madonna. When our unknown host saw us, he dismissed his clamorous petitioners, and greeted us with the courtesy which is the heirloom of the Persian race. Seats were brought for us, tea and coffee served to us, a blue cotton-clothed multitude of gardeners offered us baskets of unripe plums, dishes of lettuce, and bunches of stiffly-arranged flowers. We sat and conversed, with no undue animation, here and there an occasional remark, but the intervals were rendered sociable by the bubbling of kalyans. At length we rose to go, and as we walked down the garden-paths many compliments passed between us and our host. At the gate he assured us that our slave had been honoured by our acceptance of his hospitality, and with low bows we mounted our horses and rode away.

We had not in reality trenched upon his privacy. There was, indeed, a part of his domains where even his hospitality would not have bidden us enter. Behind the house in which we were received lay the women's dwelling, a long, low, verandaed building standing round a deep tank, on whose edge solemn children carry on their dignified games, and veiled women flit backwards and forwards. Shaded by trees, somewhat desolate and uncared-for in appearance, washed up at the further end of the garden beyond the reach of flowers, the sight of the andarun and of its inhabitants knocks at the heart with a weary sense of discontent, of purposeless, vapid lives – a wailing, endless minor.

So in the wilderness, between high walls, the secret, mysterious life of the East flows on – a life into which no European can penetrate, whose standards, whose canons, are so different from his own that the whole existence they rule seems to him misty and unreal, incomprehensible, at any rate unfathomable; a life so monotonous, so unvaried from age to age, that it does not present any feature marked enough to create an impression other than that of vague picturesqueness, of dulness inexpressible, of repose which has turned to lethargy, and tranquillity carried beyond the point of virtue.

And these gardens, also with their tall trees and peaceful tanks, are subject to the unexpected vicissitudes of Eastern fortune. The minister falls into disgrace, the rich merchant is ruined by the exactions of his sovereign; the stream is turned off, the water ceases to flow into the tanks and to leap in the fountains, the trees die, the flowers wither, the walls crumble into unheeded decay, and in a few years the tiny paradise has been swept forgotten from the face of the earth, and the conquering desert spreads its dust and ashes once more over it all.

THE KING OF MERCHANTS

Quite early in the morning we rode out to his garden. We had left Tehran, and moved up to one of the villages lying eight miles nearer the mountains on the edge of the belt of fertile country which stretches along their lower slopes. Our road that morning led us still further upwards through a green land full of wild-flowers, which seemed to us inexpressibly lovely after the bare and arid deserts about the town. The air was still fresh with the delicious freshness of the dawn; dew there was none, but a light, brisk wind, the sun's forerunner, had shaken the leaves and grass by the roadside and swept the dust from them, and dying, it had left some of its cool fragrance to linger till mid-day in shadowy places. We rode along dark winding paths, under sweet-smelling walnut-trees, between the high mud walls of gardens, splashing through the tiny precious streams which came down to water fields, where, although it was only June, the high corn was already mellowing amidst a glory of purple vetch. The world was awake – it wakes early in the East. Laden donkeys passed us on their way to the town, veiled women riding astride on gaily-caparisoned mules, white-turbaned priests, and cantering horsemen sitting loosely in their padded saddles. Ragged beggars and half-naked dervishes were encamped by the roadside, and as we passed implored alms or hurled imprecations, as their necessity or their fanaticism indicated.

At the foot of the mountains we stopped before a long wall, less ruinous than most – a bare mud wall, straight and uncompromising, with an arched doorway in the midst of it. At our knock the double panels of the door were flung open, disclosing a flight of steps. Up these we climbed, and stood at the top amazed by the unexpected beauty which greeted us. The garden ran straight up the hillside; so steep it was that the parallel lines of paths were little but flights of high narrow stairs – short flights broken by terraces on which flower-beds were laid out, gay with roses and nasturtiums and petunias. Between the two staircases, from the top of the hill to the bottom, ran a slope of smooth blue tiles, over which flowed cascades, broadening out on the terraces into tiny tanks and fountains where the water rose and fell all day long with a cool, refreshing sound, and a soft splashing of spray. We toiled up the stairs till we came to the topmost terrace, wider than the rest. Here the many-coloured carpet of flowers gave place to a noble grove of white lilies, which stood in full bloom under the hot sunlight, and the more the sun blazed the cooler and whiter shone the lilies, the sweeter and heavier grew their fragrance. Those gardens round Tehran to which we were accustomed had been so thickly planted with trees that no ray of light had reached the flower-beds, but here in the hills, where the heat was tempered by cool winds, there was light and air in abundance. On the further side of this radiant bodyguard was a pleasure-house – not a house of walls, but of windows and of shutters, which were all flung open, a house through which all the winds of heaven might pass unchallenged. There was a splashing fountain in the midst of it, and on all four sides deep recesses arched away to the wide window-frames. We entered, and flinging ourselves down on the cushions of one of these recesses, gazed out on the scene below us. First in the landscape came the glitter of the little garden; lower down the hillside the clustered walnuts and poplars which shaded the villages through which we had ridden; then the brown, vacant plain, with no atmosphere but the mist of dust, with no features but the serpentine lines of mounds which marked the underground course of a stream, bounded far away by a barren line of hills, verdureless and torrent-scored, and beyond them more brown plains, fainter lines of barren hills to the edge of the far horizon. Midway across the first desert lay a wide patch of trees sheltering the gardens of Tehran. Down there in the town how the sun blazed! The air was a haze of heat and dust, and a perspiring humanity toiled, hurrying hither and thither, under the dark arches of the bazaar; but in the garden of the King of Merchants all day long cool winds blew from the gates of the hills, all day long the refreshing water rippled and sparkled, all day long the white lilies at our feet lay like a reflection of the snow-capped mountains above us.

We sat idly gazing while we sipped our glasses of milkless tea much sugared, nibbled sweetmeats from the heaped-up dishes on the ground beside us, handed round the gurgling kalyans, and held out our hands to be filled with stalkless jessamine blossoms deliciously scented. At noon we rose, and were conducted yet deeper into the domains of the royally hospitable merchant – up more flights of steps, past a big tank at the further side of which stood the andarun, the women's lodging, where thinly-clad and shrouded forms stepped silently behind the shutters at our approach, down long shady paths till we came to another guest-house standing at the top of another series of cascades and fountains. Here an excellent repast was served to us – piles of variously flavoured rice mixed with meat and fruits and sauces, roasted kabobs, minces wrapped in vine-leaves, ices, fruits, and the fragrant wine of Shiraz.

Towards the cool of the evening the King of Merchants appeared on the threshold of his breeze-swept dwelling, a man somewhat past the prime of life, with a tall and powerful figure wrapped in the long brown cloak, opening over the coloured under-robe and spotless linen, which is the dress of rich and poor alike. He was of a pleasing countenance, straight-browed, red-lipped, with a black beard and an olive complexion, and his merry dark eyes had a somewhat unexpected twinkle under his high, white-turbaned forehead. A hospitable friend and a cheerful host is he, the ready quip, the apt story, the appreciative laugh, for ever on his lips; a man on whom the world has smiled, and who smiles back at that Persian world of his which he has made so pleasant for himself, strewing it with soft cushions and glowing carpets, and planting it round with flowers. Every evening the hot summer through, he is to be found in his airy garden at the foot of the mountains; every evening strings of guests knock at his hospitable gates, nor do they knock in vain. At the top of his many staircases he greets them, smiling, prosperous – those stairs of his need never be wearisome for alien feet to climb. He takes the new-comers by the hand, and leads them into one of his guest-houses; there, by the edge of a fountain, he spreads carpets on which they may repose themselves; there, as the night draws on, a banquet of rice and roasted meats and fruits is laid before them, tall pitchers of water, curiously flavoured sherbets, silver kalyans; and while they eat the King of Merchants sits with them and entertains them with stories garnished with many a cheerful jest, many a seasonable quotation from the poets. At length he leaves them to sleep till dawn, when they arise, and, having drunk a parting glass of weak golden tea, repair to the nearest bath, and so away from the cool mountain valley and back to the heat and labour of the day. He himself spends the night in his andarun, or lying wrapped in a blanket on the roof of his gate-house, from whence he can watch the day break over the wide plain below.

We took our share in his welcome, listened to his anecdotes, and played backgammon with him, nor did we bid him farewell until the ring of lighted lamps on the mosque close at hand warned us that unless we intended to spend the night on his house-top it was time to be gone

THE IMAM HUSSEIN

Towards the middle of July the month of Muharram began – the month of mourning for the Imam Hussein. Such heat must have weighed upon the Plain of Kerbela when the grandson of the Prophet, with his sixty or seventy followers, dug the trenches of their camp not far from the Euphrates stream. The armies of Yezid enclosed them, cutting them off from the river and from all retreat; hope of succour there was none; on all sides nothing but the pitiless vengeance of the Khalif – the light of the watch-fires flickered upon the tents of his armies, and day revealed only the barren plain of Kerbela behind them – the Plain of Sorrow and Vexation.

In memory of the sufferings and death of that forlorn band and of their sainted leader, all Persia broke into lamentation. He, the holy one, hungered and thirsted; the intercessor with God could gain no mercy from men; he saw his children fall under the spears of his enemies, and when he died his body was trampled into the dust, and his head borne in triumph to the Khalif. The pitiful story has taken hold of the imagination of half the Mohammedan world. Many centuries, bringing with them their own dole of tragedy and sorrow, have not dimmed it, nor lessened the feeling which its recital creates, partly, no doubt, because of the fresh breeze of religious controversy which has swept the dust of time perpetually from off it, but partly, too, because of its own poignant simplicity. The splendid courage which shines through it justifies its long existence. Even Hussein's enemies were moved to pity by his patient endurance, by the devotion of his followers, and by the passionate affection of the women who were with him. The recorded episodes of that terrible tenth of Muharram are full of the pure human pathos which moves and which touches generation after generation. It is not necessary to share the religious convictions of the Shiahs to take a side in the hopeless battle under the burning sun, or realize the tragic picture of the Imam sitting before his tent-door with the dead child in his arms, or lifting the tiny measure of water to lips pierced through by an arrow-shot – a draught almost as bitter as the sponge of vinegar and hyssop. 'Men travel by night,' says Hussein in the miracle play, 'and their destinies travel towards them.' It was a destiny of immortal memory that he was journeying to meet on that march by night through the wilderness, side by side with El Hurr and the Khalif's army.

Shortly after we landed in Persia we came unexpectedly upon the story of the martyrdom. In the main street of Kasvin, up which we were strolling while our horses were being changed (for we were on our way to Tehran), we found a crowd assembled under the plane-trees. We craned over the shoulders of Persian peasants, and saw in the centre of the circle a group of players, some in armour, some robed in long black garments, who were acting a passion play, of which Hussein was the hero. One was mounted on a horse which, at his entries and exits, he was obliged to force through the lines of people which were the only wings of his theatre; but except for the occasional scuffle he caused among the audience, there was little action in the piece – or, at least, in the part of it which we witnessed – for the players confined themselves to passing silently in and out, pausing for a moment in the empty space which represented the stage, while a mollah, mounted in a sort of pulpit, read aloud the incidents they were supposed to be enacting.

But with the beginning of Muharram the latent religious excitement of the East broke loose. Every evening at dusk the wailing cries of the mourners filled the stillness, rising and falling with melancholy persistence all through the night, until dawn sent sorrow-stricken believers to bed, and caused sleepless unbelievers to turn with a sigh of relief upon their pillows. At last the tenth day of Muharram came – a day of deep significance to all Mohammedans, since it witnessed the creation of Adam and Eve, of heaven and hell, of life and death; but to the Shiahs of tenfold deeper moment, for on it Hussein's martyrdom was accomplished.

Early in the afternoon sounds of mourning rose from the village. The inhabitants formed themselves into procession, and passed up the shady outlying avenues, and along the strip of desert which led back into the principal street – a wild and savage band whose grief was a strange tribute

to the chivalrous hero whose bones have been resting for twelve centuries in the Plain of Kerbela. But tribute of a kind it was. Many brave men have probably suffered greater tortures than Hussein's, and borne them with as admirable a fortitude; but he stands among the few to whom that earthly immortality has been awarded which is acknowledged to be the best gift the capricious world holds in her hands. If he shared in the passionate desire to be remembered which assails every man on the threshold of forgetfulness, it was not in vain that he died pierced with a hundred spears; and though his funeral obsequies were brief twelve hundred years ago, the sound of them has echoed down the centuries with eternal reverberation until to-day.

First in the procession came a troop of little boys, naked to the waist, leaping round a green-robed mollah, who was reciting the woes of the Imam as he moved forward in the midst of his disordered crew. The boys jumped and leapt round him, beating their breasts – there was no trace of sorrow on their faces. They might have been performing some savage dance as they came onwards, a compact mass of bobbing heads and naked shoulders – a dance in which they themselves took no kind of interest, but in which they recognised that it was the duty of a Persian boy to take his part. They were followed by men bearing the standards of the village – long poles surmounted by trophies of beads and coloured silks, streamers and curious ornaments; and in the rear came another reciter and another body of men, beating their breasts, from which the garments were torn back, striking their foreheads and repeating the name of the Imam in a monotonous chorus, interspersed with cries and groans.

But it was in the evening that the real ceremony took place. The bazaar in the centre of the village was roofed over with canvas and draped with cheap carpets and gaudy cotton hangings; a low platform was erected at one end, and the little shops were converted into what looked very like the boxes of a theatre. They were hung with bright-coloured stuffs and furnished with chairs, on which the notabilities sat and witnessed the performance, drinking sherbet and smoking kalyans the while. We arrived at about nine o'clock and found the proceedings in full swing. The tent was crowded with peasants, some standing, some sitting on the raised edge of a fountain in the centre. Round this fountain grew a mass of oleander-trees, their delicate leaves and exquisite pink flowers standing out against the coarse blue cotton of the men's clothing, and clustering round the wrinkled, toil-worn peasant faces. On the platform was a mollah, long-robed and white-turbaned, who was reading exhortations and descriptions of the martyrdom with a drawling, chanting intonation. At his feet the ground was covered with women, their black cloaks tucked neatly round them, sitting with shrouded heads and with the long strip of white linen veil hanging over their faces and down into their laps. They looked for all the world like shapeless black and white parcels set in rows across the floor. The mollah read on, detailing the sufferings of the Imam: 'He thirsted, he was an hungered!' the women rocked themselves to and fro in an agony of grief, the men beat their bare breasts, tears streamed over their cheeks, and from time to time they took up the mollah's words in weary, mournful chorus, or broke into his story with a murmured wail, which gathered strength and volume until it had reached the furthest corners of the tent: 'Hussein! Hussein! Hussein!'

It was intensely hot. Cheap European lamps flared and smoked against the canvas walls, casting an uncertain light upon the pink oleander flowers, the black-robed women, and the upturned faces of the men, streaming with sweat and tears, and all stricken and furrowed with cruel poverty and hunger – their sufferings would have made a longer catalogue than those of the Imam. The mollah tore his turban from his head and cast it upon the ground, and still he chanted on, and the people took up the throbbing cry: 'Hussein! Hussein! Hussein!'

Presently a dervish shouldered his way through the throng. A scanty garment was knotted round his loins, his ragged hair hung over his shoulders, and about his head was bound a brilliant scarf, whose stripes of scarlet and yellow fell down his naked back. He had come from far; he held a long staff in his hands, and the dust of the wilderness was on the shoes which he laid by the edge of the platform. He stood there, reciting, praying, exhorting – a wild figure, with eyes in which flashed the

madness of religious fanaticism, straining forward with passionate gestures through the smoky light which shone on his brilliant headgear and on his glistening face, distorted by suffering and excitement. When he had finished speaking he stepped off the platform, picked up his shoes and staff, and hurried out into the night to bear his eloquence to other villages...

There is nothing more difficult to measure than the value of visible emotion. To the Englishman tears are a serious matter; they denote only the deepest and the most ungovernable feelings, they are reserved for great occasions. Commonplace sensations are, in his opinion, scarcely worth bringing on to the surface. The facile expression of emotion in a foreigner is surprising to him – he can scarcely understand the gestures of a nation so little removed from him as the French, and he is apt to be led astray by what seems to him the visible sign of great excitement, but which to them is only a natural emphasis of speech. In the East these difficulties are ten times greater. The gesture itself has often a totally different significance; the Turk nods his head when he says ‘No,’ and shakes it when he wishes to imply assent; and even when this is not the case, the feeling which underlies it is probably quite incomprehensible – quite apart from the range of Western emotion – and its depth and duration are ruled by laws of which we have no knowledge. The first thing which strikes us in the Oriental is his dignified and impassive tranquillity. When we suddenly come upon the other side of him, and find him giving way, for no apparent reason, to uncontrolled excitement, we are ready to believe that only the most violent feelings could have moved him so far from his habitual calm. So it was that evening. At first it seemed to us that we were looking upon people plunged into the blackest depths of grief, but presently it dawned upon us that we were grossly exaggerating the value of their tears and groans. The Oriental spectators in the boxes were scarcely moved by an emotion which they were supposed to be sharing; they sat listening with calm faces, partook of a regular meal of sweetmeats, ices, and sherbets, and handed round kalyans with polite phrases and affable smiles. Our Persian servants were equally unmoved; they conformed so far to the general attitude as to tap their well-clad chests with inattentive fingers, but they kept the corners of their eyes fixed upon us, and no religious frenzy prevented them from supplying our every want. And on the edges of the crowd below us the people were paying no heed to what was going forward; we watched men whose faces were all wet with tears, whose breasts were red and sore with blows, stepping aside and entering into brisk conversation with their neighbours, sharing an amicable cup of tea, or bargaining for a handful of salted nuts, as though the very name of Hussein were unknown to them. Seeing this, we were tempted to swing back to the opposite extreme, and to conclude that this show of grief was a mere formality, signifying nothing – a view which was probably as erroneous as the other.

But whatever it meant, it meant something which we could not understand, and the whole ceremony excited in our minds feelings not far removed from disgust and weariness. It was forced, it was sordid, and it was ugly. The hangings of the tent looked suspiciously as though they had come from a Manchester loom, and if they had, they did not redound to the credit of Manchester taste; the lamps smelt abominably of oil, the stifling air was loaded with dust, and the grating chant of the mollahs was as tedious as the noise of machinery. How long it all lasted I do not know; we were glad enough to escape from it after about an hour, and as we walked home through the cool village street, we shook a sense of chaotic confusion from our minds, and heard with satisfaction the hoarse sounds fading gradually away into the night air...

After such fashion the Shiahs mourn the death of the Imam Hussein, the Rose in the Garden of Glory; and whether he and his descendants are indeed the only rightful successors of the Prophet is a question which will never be definitely settled until the coming of the twelfth and last Imam, who, they say, has already lived on earth, and who will come again and resume the authority which his deputy, the Shah, holds in his name. ‘When you see black ensigns’ – so tradition reports Mohammed’s words – ‘black ensigns coming out of Khorasan, then go forth and join them, for the Imam of God will be with those standards, whose name is El Mahdi. He will fill the world with equity and justice.’

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Slowly, slowly through the early summer the cholera crept nearer. Out of the far East came rumours of death ... the cholera was raging In Samarkand ... it had crossed the Persian frontier ... it is in Meshed! said the telegrams. A perfunctory quarantine was established between Tehran and the infected district, and the streams of pilgrims that flock ceaselessly to Meshed were forbidden to enter the holy city. Then came the daily bulletins of death, the number of the victims increasing with terrible rapidity. Meshed was almost deserted, for all whom the plague had spared had fled to the mountains, and when a week or two later its violence began to abate, flashed the ominous news: 'It is spreading among the villages to the westward.' From day to day it drew ever closer, leaping the quarantine bulwark, hurrying over a strip of desert, showing its sudden face in a distant village, sweeping northwards, and causing sanguine men to shake their heads and murmur: 'Tehran will be spared; it never comes to Tehran' – in a moment seizing upon the road to the Caspian, and ringing the city round like a cunning strategist. Then men held their breath and waited, and almost wished that the suspense were over and the ineluctable day were come. Yet with the cholera knocking at their doors they made no preparations for defence, they organized no hospitals, they planned no system of relief; cartloads of over-ripe fruit were still permitted to be brought daily into the town, and the air was still poisoned by the refuse which was left to rot in the streets. It was the month of Muharram; every evening the people fell into mad transports of religious excitement, crowding together in the Shah's theatre to witness the holy plays and to mourn with tears the death of Hussein. Perhaps a deeper fervour was thrown into the long prayers and a greater intensity into the wailing lamentations, for at the door the grim shadow was standing, and which of the mourners could answer for it that not on his own shoulder the clutching hand would fall as he passed out into the night? The cloud of dust that hung for ever over the desert and the city assumed a more baleful aspect; it hung now like an omen of the deeper cloud which was settling down upon Tehran. And still above it the sun shone pitilessly, and under the whole blue heaven there was no refuge from the hand of God. So the days passed, and the people drank bad water and gorged themselves on rotten fruit, and on a sudden the blow fell – the cholera was in Tehran.

Woe to them that were with child in those days and to them that were sick! One blind impulse seized alike upon rich and poor – flight! flight! All who possessed a field or two in the outlying villages, and all who could shelter themselves under a thin canvas roof in the desert, gathered together their scanty possessions, and, with the bare necessities of life in their hands, crowded out of the northern gateways. The roads leading to the mountains were blocked by a stream of fugitives, like an endless procession of Holy Families flying before a wrath more terrible than that of Herod: the women mounted on donkeys and holding their babes in front of them wrapped in the folds of their cloaks, the men hurrying on foot by their side. For the vengeance of the Lord is swift; in the East he is still the great and terrible God of the Old Testament; his hand falls upon the just and upon the unjust, and punishes folly as severely as it punishes crime. In vain the desert was dotted over with the little white tents of the fugitives, in vain they sought refuge in the cool mountain villages. Wherever they went they bore the plague in the midst of them; they dropped dead by the roadside, they died in the sand of the wilderness, they spread the fatal infection among the country people.

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