

# THE DERVISH OF WINDSOR CASTLE

The Life of Arminius Vambery

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with him a long and interesting conversation on the journey that I was about to make, and parts of which he had undertaken himself nearly thirty years before under conditions far less agreeable than those which await the modern traveller. Persia itself has not appreciably moved in the interval, but its neighbours have; and the presence of the Cossack sentry where the Turkoman raided and the Tartar reigned has multiplied tenfold the absorbing interest of the situation". (28 September 1889)\*

Curzon's monumental study of Persia had to be watered down and modified before it could be published. The Shah was reported to be extremely displeased with all the astringent comments made by Curzon in his book. Curzon, like several other writers of the time, did not disguise the fact that Persia was still a country of mediaeval barbarity in many ways, not least in the assortment of gruesome punishments meted out through the whole land: from crucifixion and burning alive to the most commonly used, the bastinado.

During the latter part of Nasr-ed-Din's reign, the tortures and executions, formerly of almost daily occurrence, gradually became much rarer. But throughout the whole period the Shah remained merciless in persecuting the followers of Mirza Ali Mohammed, the *Bab* ('Gateway') and founder of Babism, a new mystical movement in Islam. All Persians suspected of belonging to the sect were ruthlessly hounded from city to city, their women humiliated, and later massacred. In one publicised case a Babi was pierced through the nose and dragged by a cord through the streets. Vambéry devoted a chapter to the Babis (followers of the *Bab*) in his book *Meine Wanderungen und Erlebnisse in Persien*. His descriptions of the tortures "excessive even by Persian standards" left nothing to the imagination.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Shah's accession (in lunar years) was due to take place on 6 May 1896. *The Times* reported: "In honour of the event the Emperor of Russia has presented to the Shah a field battery of Krupp guns, with a quantity of ammunition". (Vambéry would have thought: "Typical!") However, the news reached Europe on 2 May 1896 — the same day that Emperor Franz Josef opened the Hungarian Millennial Exhibition in Budapest — that the Shah had been shot dead by an anarchist on entering a mosque. The assassination shocked the world, especially Sultan Abdul Hamid who was "put in a state of extreme terror" (as *The Times* described it), especially when it was disclosed that

the instigator of the crime lived in Constantinople.

Muzaffar-ed-Din was a shadowy carbon copy of his father when he ascended the throne. He had been a virtual prisoner in all but name during his interminable years at Tebriz. Apart from Vambéry, only a few Europeans had ever seen him.

The three long European pleasure trips undertaken by Nasr-ed-Din had left the Royal Treasury bare at his death. In 1898 Muzaffar-ed-Din appealed to Britain for financial assistance. Lord Salisbury (who had entertained the previous Shah at Hatfield, and seen his display of wealth) demurred, so the Shah turned to Russia instead. The government at St. Petersburg had no hesitation in making a large advance to meet his immediate needs, and from that moment Russian ascendancy grew in Teheran by leaps and bounds. 22,500,000 roubles (£2,500,000) were lent to the Shah at the beginning of 1900, and he lost no time in carrying out his great ambition — his own first grand tour of Europe, St. Petersburg naturally being his first stop.

In Paris the Shah narrowly escaped assassination at the hands of a fervid anti-Russian anarchist. A few weeks later he was greeted with great ceremony at the Court of Emperor Franz Josef in Vienna. Here numerous stories circulated about his behaviour, like his father eleven years before him, including one that he would habitually drink from the finger-bowls at banquets. Nevertheless, the Shah evidently adored the change and the novelty of the European capitals after spending nearly all his life marooned in a bleak Persian outpost. He took a great interest in the most recent discoveries and inventions in electricity, magnetism, and photography, which were shown him in Austria, as well as in all agricultural and industrial machinery.

Muzaffar-ed-Din had not forgotten the account in his father's journal which praised Vambéry's linguistic prowess in Budapest. He now was determined to see Vambéry — thirty-eight years after their first brief meeting — and on the train journey from Vienna to Budapest (26 September 1900) asked several times if he was still alive, and if he would be sure to meet him at the Hungarian capital.

Arriving in Budapest, the Shah's first question was: "Where is Vambéry?" When Vambéry was hurriedly summoned from the Academy, and greeted in the friendliest manner by the Shah, he was shocked by the potentate's haggard appearance: "Physically