

A
MODERN WAYFARER
IN PERSIA

By

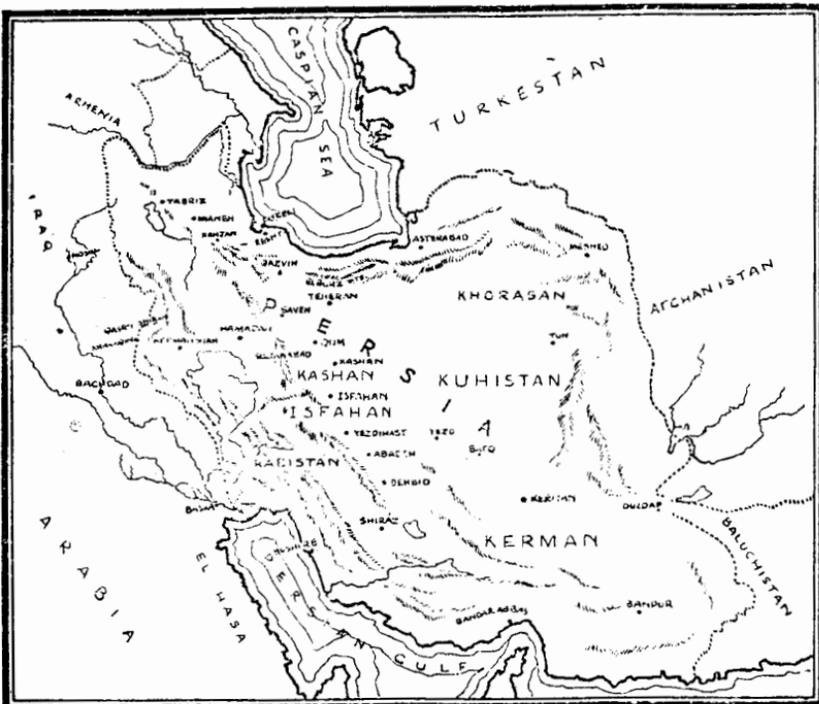
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Author of Baghdad in Bygone Days



LONDON
ARTHUR H. STOCKWELL, LTD.
29, LUDGATE HILL, E.C.4

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Russian Army in 1827 for one year. Since those days Russian influence has been strong, though now it is said the German element is gradually making itself felt.

The *Ark* or Citadel is reputed to have stood on very old foundations before it was reconstructed by Aga Muhammad Shah, tradition averring that it had been a mosque. He converted it into an arsenal at the end of the eighteenth century, and it must have proved a fine stronghold with its walls 120 feet high, while the bases are twenty-five feet thick. It was a square enclosure with a single entrance, opposite to which rose a huge tower, accessible only by means of an outside staircase, while smaller buildings in the courtyard were used as magazines. I write this advisedly in the past tense, as now the tower is a ruin, only one wall standing intact, but the staircase is still to be climbed, that, having been made safe for the public, and from the top one has a magnificent view. The enclosure has been turned into a people's pleasure garden; on payment of a quarter kran one may walk about listening to the band, or occupy a small table and refresh oneself with tea or lemonade. These, however, have to be paid for extra.

The Persians one saw here were neither picturesque as in the south, nor had they acquired the smartness of the modern clothing as had the inhabitants of Teheran. The women as usual congregated in a corner of the garden, entirely concealed in their black *chadders*, and their *futtahs*, the horse-hair masks, while the men strolled about or sat gossiping idly, often without collar or tie, their European clothes thrown on anyhow. They seemed to shave seldom judging from the black and unattractive stubble on their faces, and their hair looked unbrushed under the ridiculous Pahlavi hats, which they wore pushed back on their heads. It is one of the minor things in Persia that one does not readily get over, to be served

at table or to find the "housemaidman" cleaning one's room, in shirt sleeves, minus a collar and tie, and with a hat on. It is so much like a military cap that it appears much more incongruous than the *fez* or *tarbouche*, which is a smart headgear.

As we lingered on in the public gardens, sipping our tea, and enjoying the little cakes, we went over the history of that sect, the Babis or Bahais, which has found many adherents in Persia to-day, and to whom Tabriz is a hallowed place. For here, near the spot where we were sitting, the young prophet of Shiraz, Mirza Ali Mohamed, better known as the "Bab," was executed in 1850. He was the founder of the Babi religion, the word *Bab* meaning the Gate, whereby men might learn great spiritual truths and mysteries. Mirza Ali Mohamed was born in 1820, and at the time of his death had a large following. His life appears to have been not only exemplary, but he had that charm and magnetism that all leaders of great movements possess. His writings which he compiled for the use of his followers, have as their keynote the universal love of mankind, and incorporate some of the great ethics and poignant teachings of both Christ and Mohamed, and none of the fierceness and sensuality often to be found in eastern religions. Naturally enough the *mullas* of Islam began to be alarmed at the rapid growth of this new sect, and took measures to check it. Persecutions followed and the *Bab*, with several of his most noted followers, were shot just outside the Citadel, being first suspended to a gallows while their bodies were riddled with bullets. It is said that many of the Babis looked on the *Bab* as the Imam Mahdi, who, according to the Shiite sect of Mohammedans, is to return one day as Saviour of the world.

On the death of the *Bab* his mantle fell on a youth, Mirza Yahya, called also *Subh-i-Ezel*, the Dawn of

Eternity, and who had been designed by the *Bab* himself to be his successor. After the events of 1850, many of the Babis, and with them Mirza Yahya and his family, fled to Baghdad, hoping to find protection under the Turks, but they were removed by the Porte to Adrianople. In 1866 occurred an event which rent the sect in twain. Mirza Husein Ali, the half-brother of the now acknowledged *Bab*, who possessed a more assertive character than his half-brother, suddenly announced that he was the true *Bab* who should succor the world, the others having been the forerunners, and he called himself *Beha'u'llah*, the Splendour of God. He called on all Babis to acknowledge him as such; many, however, refused to do this, adhering to the supremacy of Mirza Yahya. Meanwhile both sections of this religion were again deported by the Turks—Mirza Yahya of the *Bab*, with his followers, to Famagusta, on the island of Cyprus, and the Bahais, the adherents of Mirza Hussein Ali, the *Beha'u'llah*, to Acre in Syria. From here the Bahai faith has spread widely, over Asia, America, and through Europe, and numbers over two millions, while the Babis have dwindled to almost nothing. When the British took over Cyprus in 1878, they found Mirza Yahya a state prisoner. He remained on the island till his death in 1912, surrounded by a few faithful disciples, as a pensioner of the Cyprus Government, as he had no means of subsistence, other than the allowance made to him. Mirza Hussein Ali, *Beha'u'llah*, died in Acre in 1892 and was succeeded by his son, known as *Ghun-i-Azam*, the Most Mighty Branch. Now that religious persecutions have been temporarily stopped, at any rate in Persia, the Bahais are no longer afraid to acknowledge their religion. They have a large colony in Tabriz and are considered a very law-abiding and industrious sect.

Tabriz at the present time is neither an interesting,

nor is it a beautiful city. What fine buildings it may have possessed have been ruthlessly pulled down by the modern town architects, and poor erections are being put up in their stead. Even the bazaars, that used to rank among some of the finest in Persia, are being gradually demolished. One which has been partially pulled down, and whose present entrance gives on to a new wide street built on the site of a vanished bazaar, looked exactly like the entry to a railway tunnel, the vaulted arch of the bazaar being exposed without the customary gate or tiled portal. The old ones which we did penetrate into, had handsome wide streets, chiefly full of Russian goods, the conical sugar loaves, wrapped in purple or blue paper, being very conspicuous. The foreign wares come chiefly from Russia, Czecho-Slovakia and Germany, being brought through Russia, and only the food shops still retain their Persian characteristics.

We were fortunate enough to come across one or two second-hand shops where we purchased some small antiques, pieces of *papier maché* scraps of old embroideries, and a little saddle bag, and also picked up for a few pence, some of the local products, brightly knitted woollen socks, and the durable rope-soled shoes. In one of the newer streets were a couple of so-called antiquity shops, a more glorified edition of the ones in the bazaar, and from them, too, we made purchases. Here we found some nice pieces of old tiling, antique Persian as well as European china, made, no doubt, for some influential man years ago; curious glass bottles, and a great variety of prayer beads, which make excellent necklaces. There were also oddments in silver, brass and wood, of no great value or price, but interesting as little souvenirs of a people who are fast becoming modernised, and who will probably in future only use the manufactured products of Europe or America.