

By the same author

The Heart of Nepal

THE HEART OF IRAN

by

DUNCAN FORBES



Illustrated and with maps



LONDON

ROBERT HALE LIMITED
63 Old Brompton Road, S.W.7

163. 6272

Foreword

IRAN IS FAR better known than Nepal, which was the subject of my last book. The country's great bulk, nine-tenths of it desert, lies astride the land route to India, and ever since the end of the sixteenth century, when two Elizabethan knights, the Shirley brothers, went by way of Russia to the court of Shah Abbas at Isfahan and taught the Persians how to make cannons, there has been a continuous stream of travellers' tales in English describing the Persian scene.

Throughout the nineteenth century the British looked at Persia through the spectacles of India. More Englishmen approached the country up the Persian Gulf than ever took the short land route across Turkey, and British policy in Persia was usually decided in Delhi. But now all this has changed. Indian independence in 1947 was followed by the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. Diplomatic relations were broken off, and when they were restored, the British Embassy in Teheran became the largest in the Middle East, invariably dealing direct with London.

Yet the strange fascination of the country has not changed. Be it Persia or Iran, the English mind still leaps the Balkans and the Turkish mainland to light on the tawny deserts at its heart, and the vivid blue domes of its oasis towns, and the pale-green poplars of the Elburz.

Like the connection between England and Italy it is a liaison of opposites—of sober reticence with bubbling effervescence, of cloud and mist with bright sunlight, of practical orderliness with wild individuality, of quiet understatement with loud bravado. The Persians take us to their hearts with their zest for life and open-mindedness, and they infuriate us with their intriguing and squandering and feckless promises. In a world of militant republics pride in the age-old Persian monarchy remains. Many criticize it. Many do not see why the Iranians should be loyal to their Emperor, forgetting that we ourselves are loyal to our Queen. Yet it is another tie—the feeling for monarchy—that links us with the Persians.

In spite of this, there have been few books about Iran in

quarter of a century ago. From it the road leads downwards through an avenue of trees as straight as a die to the Vakil Mosque at the bottom of the slope. There it levels off into a plain before rising, a mile or two beyond, to the next mountain range. On either side the buildings of the city are spread out, interspersed with the domes of mosques and imamzades and the trees of the avenues and gardens.

The bus took us down to the Khiābān-e Zand, the broad boulevard which runs north-west to south-east across the town on the same axis as the mountain ranges, then turned into a caravansarai to deposit us. There I left my companions of two days and went off to find the hotel that had been recommended to me. It proved to be a fine building, decorated with blue kashi and mirror work, standing in a handsome garden, but when I entered my heart sank. The venerable building echoed with emptiness, the narrow rooms were bare, there was no hot water, and two apologetic servants advised me to go to the three star tourist hotel, since discomforts tolerable in a peasant's cottage are not to be supported in a town hotel.

The aged desk clerk welcomed me to Shiraz and talked to me in gentle tones about the South Persia Rifles of the First German War, in which he had served as quartermaster. This force originated in a small detachment of Indian troops sent to Bandar Abbas from India in 1916, under the command of Sir Percy Sykes. Its main purpose was to check the influence of the redoubtable German agent, Wassmuss, who had succeeded in stirring up the tribes against a government friendly to the British.

In Iran, by means of recruitment from the gendarmerie, whose Swedish officers had sided with the Germans, and from other sources, Sykes increased his strength to eight thousand, and then marched through hostile tribal territory to Shiraz. The occupation of the town was relatively peaceful until 1918, when the tribesmen, believing that Britain was going to lose the war, invested Shiraz with about six thousand men against the garrison of some two thousand. With some difficulty they were beaten off.

Not only the desk clerk, but several others of the elder citizens of Shiraz were to testify to the considerable impression this force had made on the region. It was active, not only in pacifying the tribes, but also in converting camel tracks to wheeled routes, surveying and opening up communications generally.

In the Second German War also, the Indian Army was in

Shiraz. History repeated itself with the aerial descent of German saboteurs on Fars to work on the grievances of the tribes. But it was not until after the departure of the Indian Army that serious tribal disturbances took place. This was during the tribal rebellion of 1950, when at times it was impossible to leave the town without running the gauntlet of armed hold-ups on the road.

Talking about these things with the desk clerk I came to feel that I was now in regions where the British connection was strong. Shiraz looks south towards the Persian Gulf and India as well as north towards bustling Teheran. The oil-rich Bedouin, millionaires by a chance turn of the wheel of fortune like winners of football pools, come to Shiraz to hawk and hunt in the coolness of the hills. With their musicians playing monotonous thin music on the pipes, they entertain their guests and retainers in the big new tourist hotel.

Later I went out into the Khiābān-e Zand, where the creepers trained to climb up the lamp posts lent a peculiarly tropical appearance to the scene. After I had been walking a few minutes a schoolboy accosted me.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Forbes," I said. "What is yours?"

"Abbasian. What are you doing here, please?"

"Nothing."

"You are an explorer?"

"No."

"I am studying at the technical school. I am a welder."

"I see."

"I am also a Bahai. I am not an ordinary Moslem, you see. I am a Bahai. We Bahais have our headquarters in Israel and we have our holy book also."

"I see. And who wrote your holy book?"

"I do not know, Sir. Please, have you no job here?"

"No."

"Then you must be an explorer. You are *Almān*?"

"No. *Englis*."

"I see. Can you answer me a question, please. How far is it from here to London?"

"About four thousand miles, I think. More or less."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"And how much does it cost to live there?"

"For you or for me?"

"Let us say, for me."

"You might live on twenty toumans a day, but it would be difficult."

"Thank you. I will write that down."

"You are thinking of going there?"

"Perhaps I will go there, if it is possible."

I left him writing down the answers in his note book, and thought about the Bahai and their curious history. They originated in this same city of Shiraz with Syyed Ali Mohammed, who called himself the *Bāb* or "gateway", through which men must communicate with God. He preached that he, himself, was the Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi, returned to earth for the salvation of mankind, and gained an enthusiastic following. But in 1850 he was taken to Tabriz and executed on the orders of Nasser-ud-din Shah's vizier. They say that when he was shot by the firing-squad, the bullets cut the rope with which he was bound without hurting him, and that he escaped and had to be caught and shot a second time.

On the death of the *Bāb* a certain Baha-Ullah of Mazanderan announced that he was the appointed successor, and was a greater man than the Mahdi himself. This was heresy, and he was banished. But the followers of the *Bāb* and of Baha refused to be repressed, and as a consequence the Shah ordered a general massacre at Zenjan, between Teheran and Tabriz, at Yezd, and at Niriz, to the east of Shiraz. Bahaism continued underground, however, and because of its unorthodox beliefs became liberal in outlook and unsettling to the established Moslem dogma. Some called it an invention of the English, because the British offered sanctuary to the Bahai in their colonies. Baha-Ullah, himself, went to Palestine, where the temple of Bahaism was set up on Mount Carmel. His brother went to Cyprus.

Today there may be as many as three million Bahai throughout the world, including many educated men and women. They persevere in their liberal beliefs, which include equal pay and rights for women, a fair average income for all, and free intercourse between all races. The book of the Bahai is called *Iqān*, meaning "certitude."

Happy are the Bahai, if they have certitude.

12

The Gardens of the Poets

I HAD NOT been in Shiraz for many days before the spell of the poets fell on me, for the Shirazis love their poets, know them, and as convincing proof of their devotion, can quote them at length on any suitable occasion.

I went first to visit the mausoleum of Hafez, which is situated in the place known as Mosalla. As I walked down the avenue, with the high brick wall of a hidden garden on my left, a large station-wagon drew up alongside me.

"Can I take you anywhere?"

"Thank you very much, but I am just taking a walk."

"Let me show you some of the sights of Shiraz."

"Don't let me trouble you."

"It is nothing. I have plenty of time. Please."

"Very well. Thank you very much."

So I climbed into the station-wagon and the Member of Parliament for Abade introduced himself. "I am a Member of Parliament," he said, "but unfortunately now we have no parliament, so I am now just looking after my lands."

We reached the mausoleum, which in Hafez' day was well outside the town, in the groves to the north, but has now been caught up by the development of the municipal stadium and the Faculty of Letters of the University. It is still a delectable garden, however, which was completely modernized in 1936, after it had been closed to public burials. As one enters one faces palm trees as well as pines and poplars, reminding one that this is the deep south, not far from the Persian Gulf. In front, a long colonnade, inscribed with lines from the poems on a blue background, acts as a façade to the interior garden, in which the tomb itself is situated under a domed roof, supported by more columns.

The inner garden, which is interspersed with the graves of those who have sought to capture something of the aura of the poet by being buried near him, is planted out with orange trees and mulberries, with roses and geraniums below them.