PERSIA

Romance & Reality

by

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Mahendez Dashgerdi, a man with a kindly, humorous face who took us to his garden, that I might see cucumber plants being manured with that mixture of night soil and wood ashes which donkeys brought daily from the city, and which is of primary importance in agriculture throughout Persia. The people of Ispahan and the neighbourhood are said to be the best gardeners in Persia, and at one time there was a manure (*zibl*) market, the merchants having specimens in little pouches in a belt round their waist, the biggest price going for the manure from the Jewish quarter, because Jews ate the fattest! There are few horses and cows, there is no artificial manure, so the position is difficult. Whenever there are ruins, and they are almost everywhere, the farmer knocks down the old mud walls and puts them on the land, for there is a large quantity of straw or manure mixed with the mud.

The garden had many fruit trees and some wild flowers, whose names he knew. The white mulberries hung thick on the trees, the apricots grew whilst one looked at them, the yellow flower of the famous Ispahan melons made all their mouths water, the lovely blossoms of the pomegranate were like little fires.

Out of the fierce sun we went into the cool house, now only used for picnics, past the kitchen with its samovars and charcoal fires, a cupboard where a white rabbit and its huge family were fat and happy, and up the steep stairs on to a roof which led into a series of three rooms, one entirely papered with illustrations taken from French and English papers about 1880. The old owner had been so proud to put these marvels of Europe upon his walls! The end room had been prepared for us by covering the floor with carpets and putting two bolster-pillows in the alcoves. The three tall doors were opened to let in the warm soft wind, and we looked out through the tree-tops to the purple mountains on one side and to the garden, the village and a solitary rugged mountain on the other.

We all sat upon the floor, the four men quite at ease, but I rather uncomfortable and very soon stiff and numbed. What an odd collection we were; the poet who was a Moslem and a Sufist, the boy a Moslem with a deep sympathy for Christianity, the writer a Moslem trying to twist it into a religion fit for modern life, the doctor a Bahai, sure he was superior to the others because he held the last revelation, and I, a woman, a European and an agnostic. For an hour we discussed religion, its place in Persia, in the past, the present and the future. The boy said the modern Persian owed many of his better ideals to Christianity, the writer and the poet denied this, good-humouredly but firmly, the Bahai

declared that all the good of both, but not the bad of either, was included in Bahaism.

A tall servant, barefoot, wearing marvellously-patched clothes, brought us tea, and then, as a great honour, some of the 'First Fruits', delicious little green cucumbers, a huge dish of white mulberries, small white cherries, and—a bunch of roses. The poet quoted a quatrain about the First Fruits and the charm of everything that was fresh, the new moon, spring flowers, every emotion experienced for the first time.

The cucumbers could be eaten because they had skins. I tasted one mulberry out of politeness, found it very insipid and washed the cherries in my tea. The latter seemed to them the act of one who dared not tackle life bravely, but they, a little scornfully, recognized that Europeans had weak insides and, realizing the danger, thought it would certainly be a pity if I died before my tour was completed. The poet noticed that I was having a struggle to keep my eyes open, so suggested that I should rest, and they all patted the pillow before disappearing to leave me to sleep on the floor.

I wandered about with European modesty trying to find a lavatory, but finally had to seek their aid. The poet had disappeared and the other three did not know the geography of the house. There followed a great search, up and down the stairs, in the house and in the garden. It was a sort of hunt the slipper!

I slept for an hour and then lunch appeared, a proper Persian lunch on the floor, mountains of rice, dozens of chickens, yards of bread, pints of curdled milk, dishes of fruit and more roses. I had a spoon and fork, but the others ate very nicely with bread and fingers. The doctor said he was suffering from indigestion and obesity, which the poet replied were a proper punishment for being a Bahai!

After lunch we started on an unending number of glasses of tea, cigarettes and philosophy, mixed with poetry. The poet was a Sufist but practical also, his poetry was in the old forms, *Rubáiyát*, the *Ghazel*, the *Ghatn*, but his ideas were alive, for the people of today, especially for the young people who are going to make the new Persia.

'Listen, my friends, because youth is the best time, because then only can you fully develop yourselves. Look at life, see that it is like a moving river, be quick, for the time is too short to learn all that is needed. Eat from the table of life joyfully but do not forget to give food to others, for know that the miser gets worry but no joy.'

It was about this place in the argument that the writer and the doctor,

having made themselves comfortable, fell fast asleep on the second cushion; there they lay side by side, the thin little writer with his keen intelligent face, the doctor with his rotund content.

The poet looked at them and laughed. 'Bahaism is no good, but we human beings are some good. We five are all different, we five are all the same. You have come so far to see Persia and understand Persians. You have walked seven miles along the roads that we may all talk together here freely. And you are a woman. I think you are what you are because Sufism was born 1200 or more years ago. You owe something to Persia and our women will some day owe much to you.'

The Bahai started, sat up, puffing. 'You scorn the Bahais, but what do they say—a bird cannot fly with only one wing, humanity cannot go upwards when half of it, its women, are held down by Moslemism.'

The poet laughed and looked at me, speaking rapidly, words he knew I could only understand a little, but the spirit of the man was comprehensible and admirable.

More tea came and a dish of mulberries, cherries and tiny cucumbers arranged in a bed of pink roses. Everyone took a rose and smelt it as they ate.

The day had drawn towards an end, the sun was low, a golden light shone over the garden and the hills were an exquisite blue. The host put the cucumbers and roses into a handkerchief for me to take to the hotel.

But the carriage had not come! The roads were so hot that they burned our feet, the tall mud walls were like efficient radiators. The boy ran ahead in the hope of finding a wandering carriage, the writer and I walked on with comparative perkiness but little by little the fat doctor dropped behind. I expected him to turn entirely into perspiration and the perspiration into steam, but when we drove back for him he was sitting contentedly by the road, his shoes and tie off, his collar undone. He said he was ready for another meal!

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HOUSEKEEPING IN PERSIA

I DECIDED, on my return to Ispahan, to settle there for a couple of months, as I knew a number of interesting Persians, and during August, Ispahan was comparatively cool. It was quite useless remaining at the hotel as very few women would call upon me: any woman in a

There are probably not more than 12,000 Parsees in Persia, so that numerically they are not important, but their women will probably be free before the Moslems, and as they are a people of considerable physical strength, mental ability, unusual industry and, instead of being despised, are now almost respected as the preservers of the original Persian, pre-Arabian religion, they may have a considerable influence.

No one yet knows what use the Parsees will make of the 2000-year-old, tri-partite Zoroastrian slogan:

'*Think good, speak good, do good*'.

At Yezd I visited two girls schools run by the Bahais because the government would not provide enough. The head of the first school was an unmarried woman who had a married assistant. I sat talking to them in the small, neat, clean and charming courtyard while we had cold sherbet in bright yellow glasses that stood on glass plates and cucumbers which were dipped into iced vinegar. When a Bahais man appeared the children over eight raced away to get their *chadars*, which were neatly folded up on shelves. The teachers said that Bahallullah had wished the veil to be abolished, but they thought that neither men nor women were yet ready and that it would be ten to twenty years before either could look at the other without lascivious and passionate thoughts.

The students in one class were sitting round an octagonal pool in which goldfish were carrying on an anti-mosquito crusade. The pupils belonged to all the local sects, but most of them had a leather case with a charm round their necks, some of the cases green to make them yet more effective.

The other Bahais school, equally neat and tidy, was run by a remarkable woman, Hadji Bibi Sorghra, whose face was thin, refined, full of eager enthusiasm. She very early became a widow and, having no children, went, in spite of her relations, to Tehran, where she lived with a Bahais family and attended school. That was fifteen years ago when the caravan took twelve days to do the journey. When she returned she realized how badly a school was needed in her own town and started one herself. Now she can do more because helped by Bahais funds, but she said pathetically:

'I am sorry we are doing so little. I learnt too long ago to be modern or to know much.

'Bahallullah said mankind had two wings, one was man, and one was

woman, and it could not fly without both. I know by my life that that is true, but in Persia to-day few know that, so that my country goes slowly.'

I was sorry that I had to go on to Kerman without seeing her again, for she was like a flower that had never had an opportunity to open.

beauty of the building with its fine tiles, delicate stucco work, exquisite wooden windows and open-work linen curtains.

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It was very difficult to get about Kerman as there was only one *droscha* in the town, the few cars were appallingly bad and to walk between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. in June was to court disaster. Because the chauffeur made a mistake, I had to walk a mile to the school run by the Bahais. I arrived dusty and tired out, but everything unpleasant was forgotten when I looked at the charming Persian woman, immaculately clean and tidy, and her thirty happy, clean pupils. She was a widow with three children, who had studied modern methods in Turkestan and had come to Persia after the Russian revolution.

The children were from two to six years of age, paying only two *rials* a month, the local community of Bahais subscribing the remainder of the expenses. Each child had its own towel and on arrival washed its hands and nails and had its head examined. That doesn't sound much in Europe, but in Kerman it took your breath away. No corporal punishment was allowed; if a child did not behave, after being given several chances, it was sent away. That attitude of kindness to one another, of kindness to animals, the teaching that blows are not the only way to manage, was really startling in a land where corporal punishment, although theoretically abolished in the schools, was still considered the only practical discipline.

The children danced as they sang:

We are children of the twentieth century,
We go to school every day,
We learn Persian,
We are the children of the future,
We must be clean and honest for our country's sake.

Those children were gay and jolly, they all had shoes, most of them had stockings and they were learning to use a handkerchief. They would not, like their parents, feel it necessary to wipe their noses on every post. That would make a pleasanter Persia! I suddenly realized that the inventor of handkerchiefs had been one of the world's greatest benefactors. Again the children walked in a circle, singing:

We are the children of the school,
We are like flowers in a garden.
We go out into the garden
To play and to run,

To use our watering cans and dig with spades.
We must be brothers and sisters,
Learning together in a class,
Wearing the same brown uniform.

I did not want to leave this place of happiness and hope, to go into the streets where the children's eyes were covered with flies, where their habits were cruel or disgusting.

Persia needs schools like this but has not the teachers and will not have foreigners. An excellent school of this type, with a clever Russian teacher, was shut up at Shiraz because, according to the new law, only a Persian can teach young children. They told me a Persian woman would take his place.

'Is she trained?' I asked.

'Oh, no; that is not necessary. She is very bright and will know what to do.'

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Another day the consular car took me along the dusty, irregular roads and into the narrow lanes until it could go no farther. I got out and walked through the alleys, where one tall mud wall cast a shadow and the other reflected the intense heat. At last two iron-studded wooden doors opened and there was the blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked Englishwoman who was the head of the Kerman Welfare-Centre and Maternity Clinic. The nurses looked at me eagerly, for I had just come from the rich land which had brought them so much comfort and from the city of Birmingham which had given recent special help.

'Is Birmingham as big and rich as Kerman?' asked one. What could I answer when perhaps only 2 per cent. of Kerman's population of 50,000 was not miserably poor and ignorant.

'It can't have anything as beautiful as our new avenue', said another proudly.

The Shah says, 'Let there be avenues', and straight as an arrow destruction pierces its way through old houses and gardens, a limited compensation is paid for the destroyed buildings and the people go somewhere, but a motor way is made, a breathing space, which becomes a new civic ideal. The slums still hide behind the avenues, just as they do everywhere in the world.

The Englishwoman, the Persian nurse and I made our way, not along an avenue but down narrow alleys, past stinking heaps of rubbish, past innumerable beggars in loathsome rags, some loquacious

mediary between him and God, and a fatalism, actually a hindrance and harmful in the modern world, which made him capable of quiet endurance and unfortunately capable of equally quiet cruelty. Islam has been a guide in small religious laws of no fundamental significance and has pointed with approval to old habits, merely because they were old, at the same time discouraging progress and education.

Many Persians say that giving up Islam, with its fears of God and *jinn*, has greatly increased petty crimes. They also blame the cinema and Western ideas, yet continue to allow the very scum of Hollywood to be shown; the cheaper the cinema the more scummy the film. It is only by increasing the schools, in which there can be some kind of ethical teaching, that Persia will be able to weather this intermediate period. It seems very difficult for Persians to apprehend that there may be social service and a feeling of mutual human responsibility without any tangible reward.

Some school children once asked a Roman Catholic if it was true that he gained only enough money for his simple life, which they knew was not luxurious.

'Yes. I am here to help you to be better Persians.'

'But some day you will be rich, won't you?'

'Surely you are buying land and villages in your own land?'

'No. I gain nothing. I am here to teach you to get rid of your ignorance.'

Some of them thought him a liar, some despised him and made up their minds to use his quixotism, but a few realized that such a spirit might make a changed Persia and a changed world.

Hence the success of Bahaism, which has encouraged education, given women greater freedom and produced a common social life which is utterly lacking in the strong individualism of Islam. Bahaism is working hard to make converts and helps with enthusiasm any member who is in trouble or distress. No one knows the number of Bahais, but they certainly are increasingly numerous and important. This sect may be a happy *via media* for some during the present period of religious unsettlement, for, by a curious piece of sophism, it is said to be possible to be a Bahai and at the same time a Christian or a Mohammedan.

The Bahais have a very exaggerated idea of the number of Americans who belong to the cult, and an astonishing hope that they may give new ideals to Europe, but, for Persia, it seemed to me a movement of immense value. It is hated with equal fury by both Christians and Mos-

lems, who accuse it of cruel conduct in the past and excess in the present, which, any unprejudiced observer knows, have at times characterized both Christianity and Moslemism. But religious people who live in glass-houses throw stones with just as much enthusiasm as anyone else. In every town in Persia I met intelligent and interesting members of this community, who shaved, did their ties neatly, and on this decent material basis erected an idealism that will surely play a big part in reconstructing Persia.

Educated people in Persia are at present very few, perhaps only a million and a half out of a total population of twelve millions, and amongst those a tiny handful are enlightened, enthusiastic, capable of the sacrifice which alone can make a better as well as a more successful nation. One of that handful said, 'One per cent. of us will save Persia. Perhaps Islam will go; it does not matter, but our ideals will spread.'

Persia has been the home of Zoroaster, of Mani, of Sufis and of the Bab, her people are naturally interested in religious and philosophical questions, but they lack the education to tackle them thoroughly and few at present have any conception of the years of hard work, of the patience and persistence, that are needed for the real scholarship which has laid the foundations of European culture. Possibly the climate is too pleasant for deep thinking, but many Persians do at least wonder about the future of Islam and are busy searching for a guiding thread in the labyrinthine ways between the old and the new.

Perhaps it is true that at the moment the living religion of Persians is education, but that is not going to take them far if they think the latest type of desk is a liberal education, that to buy a book and learn it by heart is equivalent to understanding, that a hotel band is European music; if, in fact, they, with their bright, apprehending minds, seize the externals and, unheeding, pass the essentials.

their faith, as the majority cannot read the Arabic Koran. Many of the educated are ceasing to be devout, but only a few have become free-thinkers. The new religion, Bahaism, has a great attraction for women, as it accepts them on an equality with men, gives them education, a place on its councils and an opportunity for social intercourse. This body is doing splendid work in starting girls schools all over the country. In their schools I found a number of intelligent and earnest-minded women who were modest about their learning but anxious to do their best for the students, inspired by the hope that in this time of national change they were playing a worthy part. When talking to these women I felt that neither race nor nationality was any barrier between us.

What has happened in the West will happen in the East, but the Persian woman will probably reach her freedom without so many women having to pass through the stage of unscientific feminism which was founded upon an effort to become men rather than to be free women, though what freedom really is they understand as little as we do. There will be struggles, there will be unhappiness, greatest in those marriages between an advanced woman and a man who thinks he is advanced but who believes he can have the pleasure of a companion and simultaneously the submission of a child.

An unusually able man, aged only forty, said fiercely, 'We of the East will keep our Eastern ideas of women, the *chadar*, complete obedience, no contact with other men', and then quoted with gusto this proverb: 'A wise man has copper dishes that they may not break, strong carpets that they may not wear out, but he keeps each wife only a short time and finds his pleasures in the bazaar.' But that man will die and those who take his place will have a different point of view.

Undoubtedly, if conditions were improved, the women of all classes would get much more out of life than they do today and, what is of equal importance, they could add their share of ability, energy and care to the development of the nation. The women of Persia will reach freedom by bringing up sons with new ideas, who will be encouraged by the best men of to-day.

There are two things in Persia I would not like to be—a donkey or a woman; but, from the old point of view, the woman has no responsibility, finds plenty of laughter, and the donkey feeds on flowers in the spring and in summer rolls luxuriously on the hot sand, although his pack is often too heavy and the nail his driver sticks into him in a special open wound is both sharp and long.