

QUEER THINGS ABOUT PERSIA

BY

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FORMERLY OF THE LEGATION OF FRANCE
AT THE COURT OF PERSIA

AND

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"THE SECRETS OF THE VATICAN" ETC. ETC.

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PREFACE

I HAVE never written a book whose title was so much criticised as my recently published *Secrets of the Vatican*. But no one, I think, will say that *Queer Things about Persia* is a misnomer. As its name implies, it is written on the lines of my *Queer Things about Japan*. In other words, leaving completeness to those who have had greater opportunities of studying the country, it is content to be characteristic.

It will be noticed that this book is written in the first person singular.

I have not been in Persia, whereas Mr. de Lorey spent two years there as a member of the Legation of France at the Court of Teheran.

It is right, therefore, that the descriptions should be his in form as they are in actuality. Our method of collaboration was very simple and direct. I suggested to him a general scheme for the book, drawn up on the lines of my *Queer Things about Japan*. He considered how far this was applicable to the conditions of Persia, and produced the actual scheme. Upon this we worked.

Our method of work was for him to spend so many hours or days in thinking out the subject of a chapter.

When he had arranged his notes, he dictated and I wrote down the chapter, and this time it was I who made the suggestions. But the alterations I suggested were as few as possible, because I felt that each alteration detracted from the unity of his conception. I venture to think that both the indolent reader who merely wishes to be thoroughly amused, and the more serious person who wishes to get an idea of Persia, will be equally grateful to me, for seldom has so fresh a picture been presented of that distant and unapproachable country, which has preserved its individuality unimpaired since the days when the Ruler of Persia would have overrun the world if a Spartan King had not held the passes of Thermopylæ, and Athens had not laid the foundations of her fame with her dazzling victories of Marathon and Salamis. Xerxes and Darius, Artaxerxes and Cyrus, are all household words. From Xenophon, who was one of the ten thousand Greeks who all but overthrew the great King in the heart of his empire, and when they lost their leader, fought their way back to the sea where Constantinople stands to-day, we take familiar words like *paradise* and *satrap*, just as in our own day we have taken khaki from *khak*—the Persian word for mud.

What Greeks fighting under the Persian Prince Cyrus nearly achieved at the end of the fifth century B.C., men of Greek race achieved less than a century later under Alexander of Macedon, the wonder of the world. He attacked and threw down Persia, and Asia was at his feet.

Behind the ruins of Persia rose Parthia, whose dashing horse archers outmanœuvred the iron legionaries of Rome. And Persia itself under Chosroes was a greater conqueror in the West than in her early zenith under Xerxes. But neither on these ancient military glories, when Persia ravaged the world, nor on her last great triumph, when Nadir Shah swept as a conqueror through India and brought back the Peacock Throne—most glittering of the trophies of history—as a record, do we dwell in these pages. Still less shall we linger to untwine the tortuous skein of Eastern politics. But of the life of the Shah, as the last of the dazzling monarchs of the Golden East who has survived to show us the splendour of Asia at the Court of the Great Mogul, innumerable details are given.

This book, in fact, aims at representing the life of the Shah and the life of his people—it is in the extravagances of both that we have sought *Queer Things about Persia*.

The Persian is very little changed in the centuries which have elapsed since the Arabian Nights were written. What was true of his neighbours then, comes near being true about him to-day. He is a “courtly primitive.” His manners are very perfect even for an Asiatic gentleman. He has an esprit not often vouchsafed to Asiatics; but he can also be Asiatically cruel, treacherous, and untruthful, and has only passive courage: and he is indolent and unpatriotic, though there are many brilliant exceptions.

Besides his delightful courtesy and vivacity, the Persian has many other good qualities, such as his love of poetry and literature, his love of flowers, his love of beauty generally. He is æsthetic, not only in his tastes, but in his life. He is a fine horseman and a lover of sport. He is, in fact, a survival of the mediæval, a twentieth-century troubadour hedged in by harems.

This book aims, on the one hand, at describing the life of the Persian—from the Shah in his palace to the house-guard who receives only a few shillings a month; and, on the other hand, at describing the surroundings of the European residents in Teheran. In the latter category Mr. de Lorey gives us, with engaging directness, his own experiences in taking a house, engaging servants, buying horses, wandering about the streets, shopping in the bazars, learning to speak and write Persian, and visiting Persians in their homes. And he winds up with a description of his visit to the Caucasus and Persian Kurdistan, which brought him in contact with a life and types strange and interesting even for Persia. Here we have the sublime Peak of Ararat, the ancient city of Tiflis, and Ur of the Chaldees before us. And Mr. de Lorey's narrative becomes positively thrilling as he describes his ride through the country haunted by the brigand Shahsevents into Tabriz.

Mr. de Lorey has many stories to tell—sometimes they are of adventure, as in the episode when he was held up by the seven armed horsemen in the Pass, or when he went home and found a crowd outside his

house clamouring for his blood, because his servant, Abd-Oullah, had taken a Mohammedan woman into the house ; sometimes they are illustrative of modern Persian life, such as the story how they found a boy to take its place when the cat which was the Shah's mascot died ; or the story of the Governor who, when a peasant was insensible to his graciousness, shot him like a crow ; or the story of the Frenchman who had to turn Mohammedan or die because he was discovered with a Mohammedan woman ; or a Persian version of the *Taming of the Shrew*. Sometimes they are old Persian stories, such as the Tale of the Forty Parrots ; of King Solomon's Adventure with a Djinn ; of the traveller who lost a bag of gold at the well ; of the astrologer who told a man everything that was going to happen to him in his whole life, though his gift of prophecy did not reveal that his own wife was at that moment being carried off by her lover ; of the rich merchant who divorced his wife once too often ; and of the grateful dragon ; with a score of others.

Mr. de Lorey has much to say of the humours of the Persian police ; of the humours of his servants, one of whom discontinued being a tailor to become his valet, and another left his service to become a colonel ; of the humours of Persian race-meetings and the Persian army, and Nasr-ed-Din's methods of recruiting his harem.

But the book is not given up to humours ; there are vivid descriptions of the streets and squares, the

palaces, mosques, and gardens of Teheran; of the Shah's and Grand Vizier's receptions; of hashish-smoking at the Persian princes'; of the machinery of Government, and justice; of the bastinado and executions; of the bazars; of the *hammam* or Turkish baths; of the caravanseraies or inns; of the making and selling of Persian carpets, and the like.

Mr. de Lorey has much to say on the subject of religions, in which Persia is rich, with its Shiites, Babis, Nestorians, Chaldees, and Fire-worshippers. He dwells upon the importance of Ali and the twelve Imams in Persia, on the popularity of pilgrimages, and on the extraordinariness of the religious plays which are performed in the month of Moharrem, one of which he translates. The chapter on the persecution of the Babis shows how primitive the Persians still remain, almost as much as the details of harem life do.

Mr. de Lorey has very wisely devoted a large portion of his attention to the position of women in Persia. His account of the Teheran Palace of the King of Kings; of the Peacock Throne whose jewels are valued at six millions sterling; of the huge terrestrial globe made of solid gold encrusted with jewels; of the Shah's diplomatic receptions and reviews of his troops, —will have less fascination for many a reader than the detailed account of his harem, derived from the doctor of his favourite wife. The many pages which deal with the harem of the Shah and the harems of his subjects are rich in queer things, but then, if ever a

book was exactly named, this is. It is full of queer facts about street dogs; hashish-smoking; the tricks of Dervishes; the management of water-pipes (*kalyan*); the odd garments of both men and women; the Persian tea-house; the educated nightingale; musicians; acrobats; wrestlers; the dancers in the harems; Persian food, *pilaws* and *chilaws*, and the deadly cucumber and curds; banquets; gambling; the Persian's unrivalled skill in lying; his ideas upon woman's beauty; the language of flowers, vegetables, and spices; the punishments of women; temporary marriages; Persian weddings, divorces and polygamy; the Shah's unique sleeping arrangements; the charms taken by women in order to have children; old women go-betweens; the Shah's craze for novelties and being photographed; the suite of thousands that accompanies the Shah when he is travelling; the fate of reforms; the newspaper which only lived a day; the religious conspiracy (or revolt) against the tobacco concession; the Shah's letter-boxes and telephone offices for complaints from his subjects; the Persian's idea of water-works and gas-works; his system for robbing the mails; his calendar and his faith in astrologers. The late Shah appears in a hundred different aspects: now as holding auctions in bazars, now as putting off the races to which he has asked the whole diplomatic body, because he has sneezed once and he is unable to sneeze twice.

Atmosphere is what Mr. de Lorey aimed at.

In this book no attempt has been made to give an

exhaustive account of Persia. Mr. de Lorey's aim has been to present Persia as it presented itself to the eyes of one who in the earliest years of manhood was thrown by the chances of diplomatic life into daily contact with an ancient and effete civilisation, which was generally most comic when it was meant to be serious.

Sheltered by diplomatic jealousies, the Sick Man of the Middle East, like the sick men of Turkey in the Near East, and China in the Far East, has not yet felt obliged to put his house in order. His soldiers, though armed with rifles and clothed with theatrical copies of European uniforms, are still disorderly levies; his Parliament, which has begun so well, is only a creation of yesterday; and his highest moments of religious exaltation are at the extraordinary religious drama, in which the murder of the family of Ali is enacted for the edification of the orthodox Shiite, with such a small regard for probabilities that the actors, who are taking the parts of the murderers, forget themselves, and join in the groans and tears of the audience over the death of the Imam.

DOUGLAS SLADEN.

POSTSCRIPTUM

As the book was going to press, Mr. de Lorey had the good fortune to meet a Persian Diplomatist of the highest rank, who had just arrived in Europe from

his native country. He had some surprising disclosures to make. "If I had not seen these things," he exclaimed vehemently, "I could not have believed them myself!"

The Revolution that took place a few months ago, contrary to all expectations, has been a reality. The Clergy, who had always been against every kind of reform, have been found in the van of the present movement. The least-suspected *Mollahs* have suddenly thrown away the mask of dissimulation, and have shown that they had progressive ideas and a knowledge of modern world-politics of which no one would have suspected them. Parliament, which was regarded by Europeans as a pale reflection of the ineffective Russian Duma, is proving fruitful. Several very important reforms have already been inaugurated, the most extraordinary of which is the liberty of the Press. Thanks to this, from day to day sixty papers have sprung up, in which even the Shah, who has hitherto been sacred, is openly criticised. Another not less astounding reform is the foundation of schools for girls in Persia, because the idea of allowing women to be really instructed is completely foreign to the old Persian. The Shah is frightened by the swiftness of events, and has recalled from exile to his aid the strongest man of Persia, Amin-es-Sultan, the former Grand Vizier, who, in spite of four years' travel over the world, remains true to the old Persian traditions of government, which he practised for so many years. It will be seen

from this that the Shah's attitude to the reforms seems to be one of yielding where he cannot refuse. It remains to be seen whether the aspirations of the Young Persian party will be strong enough to overcome his resistance.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE BABIS

THE Babi religion has spread widely in Persia, though its adherents have to conceal their faith, which is officially prohibited. Its tenets and history form too large, and perhaps too recondite, a subject to be treated in these pages. Readers can find what they require about them admirably handled in the pages of A. L. M. Nicolas's *Seyyed Ali Mohammed dit le Bab* (Dujarric, Paris) and Mr. E. G. Browne's various publications.

To show the inquisitorial vengeance to which the unhappy Babis have been subjected, I cannot do better than give a translation of an article which appeared in the Official Gazette of the Persian Government, relative to the attempt by the Babis upon the Shah's life.

The account, coming from an enemy of the Babis, tries to show them at their worst, but its naïve admissions only serve to bring out the high ideals and heroism of the Babi martyrs, and the cold cruelty and bigotry of their persecutors. The article convicts its authors.

"In our last number, in giving briefly an account of the attempt upon the life of the Shah, we have promised our readers to supply them with the after results of

this lamentable affair, and to let them know the result of the inquiries made to discover the motives of this vast conspiracy, directed not only against the life of our beloved sovereign, but also against the public peace, and against the property and lives of true Mussulmans. For the real aim of these malefactors was, in getting rid of the person of the King, to seize the power, and by this detestable means to secure at last the triumph of their abominable cause, in forcing, by arms and violence, the good Mussulmans to embrace their infamous religion, which differs from that sent down from Heaven, and which does not accord either with philosophy or human reason—which is, in fine, the most deplorable heresy that has ever been heard of, as may be gathered from certain of their books and pamphlets which we have been able to procure.

“The founder of this abominable sect, who began to propagate these detestable doctrines only a few years ago, and who, having fallen into the hands of the authorities, was immediately shot, was called Ali Mohammed, and had given himself the surname of Bab,¹ wishing to give people to understand by this that the keys of Paradise were in his hands.

“After the death of the Bab, his disciples met soon under the orders of another chief, Sheikh Ali of Turshiz, who assumed the position of nayeb (vicar) of the Bab, and had imposed it on himself to live in complete solitude, showing himself to nobody, and granting

¹ Bab means gate.

audiences to his principal followers only at rare intervals. They regarded this favour as the greatest that Heaven could confer on them. He had given himself the surname of Hazret Azem, the Highest Highness.

“Among the people who were attached to him one may mention first Hadji Suleiman Khan, son of the late Yah-Yah Khan of Tabriz. It was in the house of this Suleiman Khan, in Teheran, in the quarter Sar-i-Cheshmeh, that the principal Babis used to meet to deliberate upon their hateful projects. Twelve amongst them, who appeared more zealous and determined than the others, were chosen by Hazret Azem, who had the necessary arms given to them to execute the great act that he believed to be unavoidable. Pistols, daggers, cutlasses, nothing was spared, and, armed in this way, it seemed impossible for them to miss their prey.

“They were recommended to stand in the neighbourhood of Niavaran, and to wait for a favourable opportunity.

“We may refer our readers to our last number ; they will see in it how three of these madmen have taken advantage of the circumstance which presented itself on Sunday the 28th of Chavval, at the moment when His Majesty, having gone out of the town, directed himself, with his ordinary suite, towards the village where he was in the habit of going for his hunting parties. They will see how they flung themselves upon the King, one after the other, firing their pistols

nearly point-blank at His Majesty; how one of them was immediately slain by people of well-known zeal and devotion, such as Assad Oullah-Khan, first equerry of the King, Mustofi-el-Memalek, Nizam-oul-Moulk, the Keshikchi-Bashi, and other persons who were near His Majesty; how at last the two others were seized and thrown into the prison of the town.

“An inquiry was at once made into the case, and put into the hands of Adjutant Bashi Hadjeb-ed-Dowleh, the Kalentar (Minister of Police), and the Kedkhodas of the town (a sort of municipal councillors).

“Thanks to the zeal and the activity that they showed in their inquiries, they soon learned that the house of Suleiman-Khan was used as the place of meeting by these wretches. It was immediately surrounded on all sides; but whether by the neglect of the men of Hadjeb-ed-Dowleh, or by the lack of cohesion in the execution of this enterprise, they succeeded in catching only twelve, amongst them Suleiman-Khan. The others effected their escape, one does not know exactly how. But their accomplices having named several of them, the police, it may be hoped, will soon trace them.

“However, not a single day passed without the Adjutant-Bashi of the Kalentar and the *ferrashes* of the King capturing three, four, or even five Babis, whom they quickly brought before the Imperial divan or tribunal, which in such a case is held in public.

“They were interrogated at once, and condemned upon their own evidence, as well as on the denuncia-

tions of their accomplices, whom they took care to confront with them.

“These interrogatories were made in accordance with the customs and forms laid down by the law.

“We must not omit here to recall the immense service that Hadjeb-ed-Dowleh has rendered to the Faith, to the State, and to Religion, in capturing Mollah Sheikh Ali of Turchiz, in spite of all the precautions that he took not to be seen in public, and in spite of the retired and secretive life which he did not cease to lead till the moment of his arrest. By his flight from the town he had expected to find a shelter against all pursuit; he had hidden himself in a little house at Evine in the Shimran.

“He lived there, surrounded by some faithful disciples, who, like himself, had succeeded in escaping from the house of Suleiman Khan at the moment that it was surrounded.

“It is in this house that Hadjeb-ed-Dowleh, accompanied by his men, succeeded in surprising them at the moment when they expected it least. The Babis were seized, manacled, and thrown into the prisons of the town.

“His Excellency the Grand Vizier, Mirza Aga Khan, had the satisfaction of interrogating himself the chief of this hateful sect. He made him appear before him with the disciples taken at the same time as this wretch, and questioned him in their presence. Mollah Sheikh Ali of Turchiz did not attempt to excuse himself. He

avowed that he had become the chief of the Babis since the death of the Bab; that he had given the order to his most devoted disciples to kill the King. He declared even that Mohammed Sadek, who had precipitated himself the first on the King, was his confidential servant, and that he had provided himself the necessary arms to execute the regicides' project. The number of these wretches who had fallen into the hands of justice does not exceed thirty-two. As for the others, the police have not been able to find them, and it is believed that they have crossed the frontiers of Persia and gone to lead a wretched life in a *foreign land*.

“We impose upon ourselves the task of pointing out to our readers the *admirable conduct* of His Excellency the Minister of Russia on this occasion.

“One of these damnable conspirators, Mirza Houssein Ali, had taken refuge at Zerghandeh in the summer quarters of the Russian Legation. The Prince Dolgorouki, having learnt that this individual was amongst the conspirators, had him seized by his own people and sent to the Ministers of His Majesty, who, touched by an action so in conformity with the good relations that existed between Persia and Russia, evinced their profound gratitude to him. His Majesty himself had his thanks conveyed to the prince, and gave orders that the people who had been entrusted with conveying the culprit to custody should be worthily recompensed, which was done without delay.

“Amongst the Babis who have fallen into the hands

of justice, there are six whose culpability *not having been well established, have been condemned to the galleys for life.* The others have all been massacred in the following ways :—

“Mollah Sheik Ali of Turchiz, the author of this conspiracy, has been condemned to death by the Ulemas or religious judges, and put to death by them.

“Seyyed Houssein Khorassani was killed by the princes of the blood, who massacred him with pistol-shots, scimitars, and daggers.

“Mustafi-el-Memalek took charge of the execution of Mollah Zeyine-el-Abedin, Yezdi, whom he killed with pistol-shots fired point blank, after which the Mustafis of the Divan, throwing themselves upon the corpse, riddled it with pistol-shots and stabs of sword, dagger, and cutlass.

“Mollah Houssein Khorassani was killed by Mirza Kassem Nizam Oul-Mouk and by Mirza Saïd Khan, Minister of Public Affairs. Mirza Kassem was the first to approach the condemned, and shot him with his pistol point blank. Then Mirza Saïd Khan approached in his turn and fired another pistol. At last the servants of these two high functionaries threw themselves on the corpse, which they hacked to pieces with knives and daggers.

“Mirza Abdoul Wahab of Shiraz, who during his sojourn in Kazemein had rendered himself guilty in the eyes of the authorities by inciting the inhabitants to revolt, was put to death by Jaffar Kouli-Khan, brother of the Grand Vizier, by Zulfe-Khar Khan, by Moussa

Khan, and by Mirza Aly Khan, all three sons of the Grand Vizier, assisted by their servants and the guards of the King and the other people present at the execution, some using pistols, others rifles, others daggers of all sorts, so that the corpse of this wretched man was reduced to mincemeat.

“Mollah Fethoulhah, son of Mollah Aly, the book-binder, the man who, shooting at the King with a pistol loaded with lead, slightly wounded His Majesty, had his body covered with holes, in which lighted candles were stuck. Then Hadjeb-ed-Dowleh received the order to kill him with a pistol-shot, which he did by shooting at the exact spot of the body where His Majesty had been wounded. He fell stone dead. Then the *ferrashes* of the King threw themselves on the body and hacked it to pieces and heaped stones upon it.

“Sheikh Abbas of Teheran has been sent to the bottom of hell by the Khans and other dignitaries of the State, who killed him with pistols and swords.

“Mohammed Taghi of Shiraz had horseshoes nailed to his feet first, like a horse, by Ased-oullah-Khan, first equerry of His Majesty, and by the employees of the Imperial stables. Then he was beaten to death with maces and with the great nails of iron which are used in the stables to fasten the horses to.

“Mohammed Aly of Nejef-Abad was handed over to the Artillery men, who first of all tore out one of his eyes, then bound him over the muzzle of a gun and blew him to pieces.

“As to Hadji Suleiman Khan, son of Yah-Yah Khan of Tabriz, and Hadji Kassem, also of Tabriz, they were marched through the town of Teheran with their bodies stuck with candles, accompanied by dancers and by the music of the Evening, which is composed of long horns and huge drums, and were followed by a crowd of the curious, who wished to stone them, but were prevented by the *ferrashes*.

“Suleiman Khan, when one of the candles fell, sank and picked it up, and restored it to its place. Somebody having cried, ‘You sing, why don’t you dance?’ Suleiman began to dance.

“Once out of the town, the *ferrashes*, executing the orders which had been given them, cut them both into four pieces, which they hung over various gates of the town.

“Nejef of Khamseh was abandoned to the fury of the mob, who beat him to pieces with their fists and stones.

“Hadji Mirza Djami, merchant of Kachan, was killed by the Provost of the Merchants of Teheran, assisted by the merchants and shopkeepers.”

The above is the official Persian account. Comte de Gobineau, who was Minister of France to the Court of Teheran at that time, tells us—

“One saw that day in the streets and bazars of Teheran a spectacle that the population will never forget. One saw, walking between staffs of executioners, children and women, with the flesh gaping all over their bodies, with lighted wicks soaked with oil stuck in the wounds. The victims were dragged by cords and driven with

whips. The children and women walked singing a verse, which says, 'In truth we come from God, and we return to Him.' Their voices rose piercingly in the middle of the profound silence of the mob; for the population of Teheran is neither bad-hearted nor much devoted to Islam. When one of the tortured people fell, he was forced to rise with blows from whips and prods from bayonets. If the loss of blood which ensued from the wounds all over the body left him strength enough, he began to dance and shout with fervour, 'We belong to God, and we return to Him.' Some of the children expired *en route*. The executioners threw their bodies under the feet of their father and sister, who walked fiercely upon them, without looking.

"When they arrived at the place of execution near the new gate, life was again offered to the victims if they would abjure their faith, and, though it seemed difficult, means were sought to intimidate them. The executioner hit upon the device of signing to a father that if he did not abjure he would cut the throat of his two sons upon his chest. These were two small boys, the eldest being fourteen, who, red with their own blood and with flesh scorched by the candles, listened unmoved. The father answered by lying down on the earth that he was ready, and the eldest of the boys, claiming his right of birth, begged to have his throat cut first. It is not impossible that the executioner refused him this last satisfaction. At last everything was ended, and the night fell upon a heap of mangled human remains. The heads were

strung in bundles to the Posts of Justice, and all the dogs of the suburbs made their way to that side of the town.

“This day gave to the Bab more secret partisans than many preachings could have done.”