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A PERSIAN CARAVANSERAI



# CAIRO TO PERSIA AND BACK

By  
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"BY WAY OF THE SAHARA" AND "RUSSIA AT RANDOM"



WITH SIXTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS AND TWO MAPS

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## CHAPTER XLIV

## TABRIZ

**T**ABRIZ, like Meshed, was very Russian in atmosphere and exterior. Through the centre of the town ran a street as wide and as straight as the Nevski Prospekt, and all the goods we bought for our Kurdistan stage were Russian, except for the biscuits, which were British, and a ready-made suit which I simply had to buy, as all my trousers had parted company with their seats. The suit took a good deal of finding. My first cast only produced some plum-coloured horrors with pleats over the bosoms in which I looked like nothing on earth. But eventually I struck up an acquaintance with an Armenian who spoke English, and he brought me to another shop in the heart of the bazaars where, to my relief, I found a passable brown shoddy costume—made in Warsaw—with quite an attractive pin-stripe running through it. I had, of course, a large audience to see the fun. And it was fun. For nothing would satisfy the tailor but that I must try the suit on then and there *coram publico*. I was greatly embarrassed, as I knew that my pants were full of holes. However, all the onlookers said that the suit fitted me to a "T", and after a jolly haggle I paid thirty shillings for it.

Only a hundred years ago Tabriz was captured by the Russians, and while we were there we were told that as recently as two months before, on the occasion of *Nauruz* (New Year's Day), the Bolsheviks in the town had posted a proclamation on the walls urging the Persian proletariat to overthrow Shah Riza, and promising Russian military support within forty-eight hours in the event of a revolution. The proclamations were, of course, torn down, but the instigators of the movement were not punished; and the talk in the coffee-shops was that the Shah was afraid to take action against the nationals of his Soviet neighbour, who could at any time and without any resistance walk into Tabriz and hold it. Tabriz is, in fact, a target for Soviet propaganda. It aims in

general at a dislocation of all Persian trade, by means either within or without the law, in the hope that eventually the big Persian trading classes will become so dissatisfied with the Persian Government's present policy that they will in desperation support any movement towards the curtailment or suppression of Shah Riza's power.

The three main features of interest in Tabriz were the ruins of the Blue Mosque, the Citadel, and the bazaars. The Blue Mosque was frankly disappointing. It is, of course, a complete ruin, having collapsed as a result of successive earthquakes, but what we saw seemed to be an almost more insignificant shell than the picture in Lord Curzon's book had led me to expect. Some of the tiling still remains, and its blue had certainly a depth and a glitter quite out of the common; but as a monument it is quite impossible to be enthusiastic over it.

But my friendly Armenian was much more interesting about the citadel. Of it, too, little remains save the gaunt ruin of its immense southern wall. He escorted us to the top by the same stairways up which, in other days, criminals had walked to their doom. For until comparatively recent times the regular form of public execution had been to hurl miscreants from the summit to be dashed to pieces on to the parade ground eighty feet below. Behind us to the north there used to be another parade ground. Its metamorphosis is truly eloquent of New Persia. It is now a fair imitation of a "Luna Park", with a grand open-air café and paths and booths and terraces and, of course, a bandstand.

Then our guide became suddenly serious. Below us was the place where some eighty years ago Mirza Ali Mohamed, the founder of the Bahai religion, had been executed for heresy and sedition. He was a native of Shiraz, and at the early age of twenty-four declared himself as the "Bab" or Gate whereby the world might enter into the joys of the Divine Revelation which had been vouchsafed to him. His was a religion of love, and his mission was that of a John the Baptist to prepare the world to receive another and a fuller demonstration of God's mercy. He gained adherents rapidly, and as rapidly earned the hostility of the powerful orthodox oligarchy in the country, who quickly persuaded the Shah that the movement was dangerous to the dynasty and must be suppressed. The Bab was forthwith arrested, and in due course, after a farce of a trial was condemned to death.

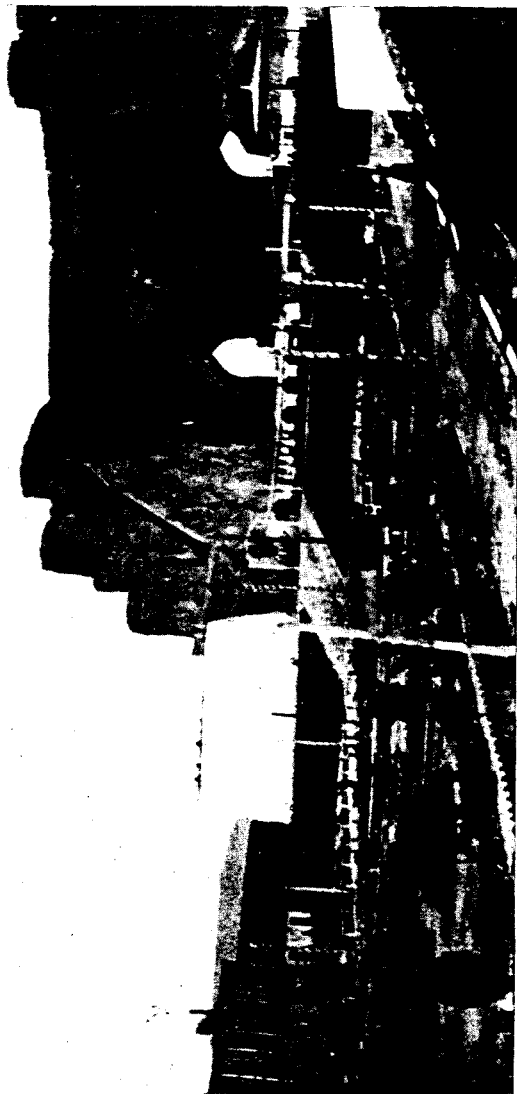
Our guide's grandfather had been in Tabriz and had

witnessed the execution. "The Bab was to be shot with two of his disciples, but they were offered an opportunity to recant before they were pinioned. One succumbed to the temptation and was released; but the Bab and the other stood firm, and were suspended by the arms from gallows-like frames in front of the firing-squad. The order was given and the volley rang out; but when the smoke had cleared away the Bab's friend hung dead on his ropes, but the Bab himself had disappeared. The bullets had cut the ropes and he had fallen unharmed and had escaped into the crowd. Of course he was discovered almost at once, and once again he was hoisted on to the gallows. But the first firing squad refused to act again, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that other soldiers were found to take their place. This time there was no mistake, and the Bab died. Afterwards his body was smuggled away by his friends and buried in a secret tomb, and even to-day none save the highest leaders of the Bahai religion know where he is buried."

I would add that during the whole time we were in Persia we never, save on this occasion, discussed Bahaism with anyone—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that no one ever discussed it with us. It is still a proscribed faith in Persia, and though it has tens of thousands of adherents everywhere in the country—to say nothing of its enormous following abroad, particularly in America—it has been driven underground by official disfavour and in many ways resembles a secret society rather than a religion.

The bazaars are huge, but they are less beautiful and more rambling than the splendid arcades of Shiraz. Not that this in any way detracts from their charm; for to me their darkness and their many twists and turns had a romantic attraction of their own; and in fact I felt absolutely at home in them and had a great time buying my carpet, a fine Tabriz runner which proved to be the last addition to my carpet map of Persia.

We had one great experience during our stay—as unexpected as it was unpleasant. We were lunching with the British Consul and his wife, who throughout our stay were perfect to us in their hospitality, and just as we reached the *vol-au-vent* of an excellent meal, the town was suddenly shaken by a violent earthquake. It lasted for about a minute and was absolutely terrifying. At once all of us leapt from our chairs to get outside, but for perhaps ten seconds the window into the garden jammed. In those ten seconds I realized all the



TABRIZ. THE CITADEL  
"OF IT LITTLE REMAINS SAVE THE GAUNT RUIN OF ITS IMMENSE SOUTHERN WALL"