

Peeps into Persia

BY

DOROTHY DE WARZÉE

(Baroness d'Hermalle)

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TO THE READER

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his name. A pilgrimage is no easy matter to undertake; it means, as a rule, a lot of expense and great fatigue. It is usually arranged by a special person who makes this his profession. Each person pays as much as he can afford, and the professional agent arranges everything—mules, tents and food. The pilgrimage usually starts in the spring, in order to allow the people to reach their homes in the late autumn and to avoid travelling in the winter months. The time spent in the holy cities is quite short in comparison with the time taken to reach them. Most of the principal cities regarded as sacred are in Arabia, but those most frequented in Persia are Meshed and Koum. But with the Shiah, as with the orthodox Sunni, the greatest pilgrimage of all is to the tomb of the Prophet himself at Mecca, and this alone confers upon the pilgrim the title Hadji.

Although the Shia are more severe than the Sunni about non-Mohammedans they are more ready to accept innovations. There are some who make of Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law, a god, and these are known as the Ali-Allahis. Then, again, there are several sects of Dervishes who get their inspiration from Suffiism—that is to say

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they aim, or are supposed to aim, only at the higher life, and take no interest in earthly things.

In 1844 a prophet arose who, in spite of his youth—he was barely twenty-five—found many disciples even among the older and more serious-minded men of all classes. This was Ali Muhammed, better known as the “Bab.” The word Bab means door or gate, and he proclaimed himself as the door to knowledge of a better life. Unhappily he was the cause of a great deal of trouble; his followers were persecuted, and on several occasions many were massacred in cold blood. He himself was arrested, and, finally, after having been treated as cruelly as possible, he was shot at Tabriz in 1855. He nearly escaped, as the first volley fired at him only loosed his bonds; had he kept his presence of mind he could have fled in the direction of the bazaar. There he would have been safe, and his cause would have been strengthened by what would have been regarded as a miracle. But he was weakened by imprisonment and ill-treatment, and he fled towards the citadel, where he was immediately captured and killed. After his death there followed a discussion among his disciples as to his successor. Some said the Bab had

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designated to succeed him a certain Mirza Yahya, who, having lost his mother at an early age, had been brought up by the mother of the chief follower of the Bab. He had, however, a half-brother, who also claimed the succession, and rivalry broke out between their respective followers. This half-brother of Mirza Yahya is known as the Behai'ullah, and his disciples in Teheran are many. When he died he was succeeded by his son Abdul Bahai, who lived until 1911 at Acre, when he went on tour in Egypt, Europe and America. The Bahais claim to have nine million followers, of whom a considerable number are in America. The Bahais can conform to other religions and believe chiefly in a progression of ideas; as new ideas come, as new things are invented or discovered, a new prophet is needed who should not contradict former prophets, but should improve on their sayings and doings. For instance, women needed to be kept in seclusion before men became properly civilized; now that men have made progress it is time to think about the women.

The Bahais count Behai'ullah as greater than the Bab, who was merely his forerunner, as John the Baptist was the forerunner of Christ.

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When Nasr-ed-Din Shah was murdered in 1896 the act was put down to the Babis, and a terrible persecution began against that sect, which reached its height in 1902. At one time the councillors of the Shah conceived the horrible idea of giving any Babi they captured to a great personage, when His Majesty would be able to judge of their fidelity and loyalty to him by the tortures they would cause to be inflicted on their prisoners. One can imagine the horrors that took place, the tortures that were inflicted. But even this did not suppress Babism. I was talking to a Persian the other day, and he told me that lately the Babis had suffered much less persecution, and since this was the case the sect was dying out rapidly. I do not know, however, if this is really so.

One of the Bab's great ideas was to place women on a different footing, to give them a place in the world, and to raise them to a higher place in the regard of the men. He strongly condemned polygamy and divorce, and recommended his followers to be kind to their women and children. He has naturally many followers among the fair sex.

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