

THE WILD ASSES

A Journey through Persia

by

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They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:
And Bahráh, that great Hunter—the wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.

The Rubaiyyát of Omar Khayyám



THE CITADEL, HERAT

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are a race apart. They always go about with their trousers tucked up like this so as to do their watering in comfort; you would think that trousers were scarcely worth wearing at all. Another traveller has called them 'good-natured and lazy and inadvertent like their gardens'; this one was certainly most good-natured and polite.

Characteristically a garden also surrounded the Ark or Citadel, the only other building of any antiquity left standing in Tabriz. The garden here is a sort of town park, blazing with zinnias and tobacco plants like a seedsman's catalogue. From the Ark's high top the Persians used to hurl faithless wives to perdition. This habit was abandoned after one such lady, kept up by her inflated petticoats as by a parachute, had floated down unharmed.

Another marvellous deliverance which might have been converted into a first-class miracle, with important religious consequences, took place here in 1850, when the Bab, the youthful founder of the new religion of Babism, was executed. He and a disciple were suspended by ropes from the ramparts, and a volley was fired at them. When the cloud of smoke cleared away, the important victim was nowhere to be seen. By some extraordinary chance none of the bullets had hit him, but his ropes had been cut, so that he slipped to the ground unhurt. For a moment even the executioners were overwhelmed with amazement, and the impression made on the mob was profound. But soon one of the soldiers caught sight of the Bab hiding in a guardroom nearby, and before his disciples could rescue him, a new firing party had disposed of him. His interesting and eclectic creed, together with its offshoot Bahatism, which is so liberal as to include the emancipation of women, has lost most of its once powerful influence in Iran, but survives among a few Europeans and Americans.

From the massive ramparts of the Ark we looked over the city and plain to the encircling mountains. To the south spread the mighty Kuh-i-Sahand, which, with Ararat and Savalan towards the Caspian, forms a trinity of extinct volcanoes dominating Azerbaijan. To the north ran line upon line of salmon-coloured hills; the long evening shadows were darkening their pockets till they looked like a pleated dress spread out in the sun. The whole landscape was frighteningly arid, but crisp and clear, as always in Iran. The orchards far beneath us made cool patches of green amid the prevailing drab of yellow and brown. From the Ark Tabriz was like any other city of the East, a humming honeycomb of yellowish-grey roofs, chimneyless and gableless, cut off from one another by high walls of mud, which formed a maze of narrow crooked lanes. There is a compelling fascination in looking from a high place over an eastern city and listening to its noises surging up in buffets of sound, interspersed with sharper and clearer bursts from the crowds directly below. All the thousand sounds that make up the life of a city seem clarified and distinguishable at that distance.

A tall tower caught our attention. 'That', said the schoolmaster, 'is the new municipal buildings, which are built of special earthquake-proof brick. They are almost finished, but we are waiting for the town clock to come from London. It is probably being held up in the customs.'

Another sign of the times is the one long street, 'the largest and best-kept in Iran', which the Tabrizis have built in contempt of the recurring upheavals of nature. Nearly seven miles in length, it cuts right across the old-fashioned bazaar streets, whose arched tunnels of red brick break the flat criss-cross pattern of the city.

Bazaars, called by Sir Denison Ross, who ought to know,

Sefid Rud or White River; to us it looked the colour of weak tea. In crossing it we left Turki-speaking Azerbaijan and entered the Persian-speaking part of Iran. The bridge was a magnificent hump-backed structure, a relic of the great Safavid dynasty. As the sun sank, the line of snow mountains on our left changed from a glory of pale colour to a black wall, scarred with great purple shadows and hollows, and silhouetted against a saffron sky.

At the time of the lighting of the lamps we came to Zinjan, where the police, after much talk, allowed us to sleep at an inn called 'Grand Hotel — Town Hall'. We preferred its courtyard to its bedrooms, and, as always, pitched our beds beneath the stars. A policeman with fixed bayonet stood sentry over us all night.

Zinjan is a small city, famous for the desperate stand which 300 Babi heretics made here in 1850 against thousands of royal troops. They held out for nine months, and their women cut off their long hair and bound it round the crazy guns to hold them together.

From Zinjan our road to Teheran ran through a perfectly flat stony plain bounded by low hills. The air was so crystal clear that objects many miles away stood out much larger than life. A donkey looked like an elephant, and the peasants working in the fields were like trees walking. Long before we reached it we could see the light flashing on a great sea-green dome. This was the mosque of Sultaniyeh, the tomb of the Mongol prince Uljaitu Khodabande, who kept court here until his death in 1316.¹ His great mausoleum remains, even in ruins, one of the world's important buildings. The prototype of the Taj Mahal and a hundred

¹ Khodabande, like many of the Mongol Khans, was baptized a Christian, and was in correspondence with the Pope and several European sovereigns, including Edward II of England. But his Muslim wife eventually prevailed upon him to adopt Islam, and he became the first Shiah ruler of Persia.