

Adventures in Persia

TO INDIA BY THE BACK DOOR

RONALD SINCLAIR



Ordeal of the Hassanabad Pass



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Chapter 8

TABRIZ

As the capital of Iranian Azerbaijan and second largest city in the country, Tabriz fell very short of my expectations. I had hoped for something more impressive in the way of general layout and public buildings, and also for more surviving ancient monuments. But I was forgetting two vital factors which have periodically plagued Tabriz throughout its long, eventful history. These are, firstly that the city lies directly on the invasion route from the north and secondly, that it also lies in an active earthquake belt. Between invasions and earthquakes, with occasional epidemics of plague and cholera, Tabriz has had a very chequered history.

Strangely enough the Mongol invaders, who devastated most of the rest of Iran, spared Tabriz. On two occasions their hordes reached the city's gates but allowed themselves to be bought off, and when they did subsequently take possession of it, instead of destroying it as was their wont, they made it their centre of government and capital of an empire extending from the Nile to the Oxus. In fact they gave Tabriz its Golden Age.

There must have been some strange quirk in the Mongol leaders which brought about a radical change in their temperament and behaviour in the course of a few decades. In AD 1258 their hordes had swept through Iran with a bestial savagery equalled only by Attila and his Huns eight centuries earlier. In their lust for conquest, they laid themselves out to destroy every vestige of civilisation and culture. Yet within a mere four decades, the Mongol El-Khan Ghazan (1295-1304) was embellishing Tabriz with a wealth of fine buildings, including an enormous royal mausoleum and extensive bazaars. Under his rule the city also became a famous centre of learning.

Ghazan's brother and successor, Oljaitu, whose tomb we saw at Sultaniyeh, continued the work of embellishment, and it was during his reign that the enormous mosque, the Masjid-e-Shah 'Ali, was built.

After the collapse of the Mongol dynasty, few outstanding monuments were erected, and only portions of two of them have survived to the present day. One is the Blue Mosque, built by Shah Jehan of the 'Black Sheep' Turkmen dynasty, who ruled 1436-1467. Of the mosque, little more than one of its entrance portals, now in dilapidated condition, is still standing. Sufficient of the original tilework remains to convey an impression of the colourful appearance of the structure in its prime, but most of the masonry at the base of the arch has been eroded or filched by local stone robbers and unless something was done very soon to repair the damage, the archway's days were clearly numbered.

The second ancient monument is the surviving portion of the great Masjid-e-Shah 'Ali, much of which was destroyed at different times by earthquakes, though sufficient still remains to give an idea of its enormous size.

A third, and the most imposing, public monument is the Arg or Citadel. It can hardly be called ancient, because although it originally formed part of the great Masjid, most of it was reconstructed and converted to its present use as recently as 1809. Since then, however, it has earned a sinister reputation, like the ancient Tower of Death in Old Bokhara, for the number of criminals and political offenders, not to mention faithless wives and surplus concubines, flung from its summit.

There is a well-known story of a certain lady who was launched into space in the usual manner, but whose wide heavy skirts belled out and parachuted her safely to earth. One would like to think—though the story does not say so—that the Governor was so impressed by this manifestation of divine protection that he gave the lady a free pardon, but in the light of other known cases, it is much more probable that his curiosity impelled him to order her to do it again.

Then there was the tragic case of the Bab, the spiritual

head of the Bahai Sect. On that occasion too, back in 1830, a miracle happened. The Bab and certain of his followers, likewise condemned to death, were first suspended by ropes slung beneath their armpits, and then executed by firing-squad. After the smoke from the volley had cleared away, the riddled corpses of his followers hung there for all to see. But the Bab himself had disappeared.

For a few moments the onlookers stood aghast. Startled true-believers plucked at their beards and invoked Allah. Wah! Wah! A miracle! The bullets of the executioners had flown high and had neatly severed the rope. That surely was a manifestation of divine protection. But the next moment the Bab was found hiding in a guard room. He was promptly strung up again and this time there was no miracle. When the smoke cleared away, his riddled body was hanging with the others.

The Tabriz bazaars are of the enclosed pattern, built on the same model as those of Tehran and Isfahan. Here are the mysterious labyrinths of long dark passages, dependent for illumination upon apertures in the lofty vaulted roof. Shafts of sunlight pierced the clouds of dust, stirred up and held in suspension by the constant movement of the milling throng, and appearing as golden columns in the surrounding semi-darkness.

The main passages have numerous narrower ones branching off them, and all are lined on either side by a continuous row of shops and stalls. Most of these are little more than cubicles, about twenty feet square, but many of them have a second cubicle as store-room or office in the rear and in some cases these in turn open onto a paved courtyard or even into a full-size caravanserai, where the merchandise is carried in and off-loaded from the caravan or pack animals, literally in the merchant's own backyard.

The dealers themselves squat cross-legged on the rug-covered floors of their shops, which are generally raised a couple of feet or more above the level of the alleyway. From this commanding position they are within arm's reach and

greeting distance of the passing throng. They spend most of their day in this sedentary position, their gaze vacant and distant, like Buddhist monks or Hindu sadhus in a posture of placid contemplation. But appearances are deceptive; their eyes are keen and they are wide awake, ready and alert like birds of prey, to pounce upon any potential victim.

On entering the bazaars from the brilliant sunshine one's first impression is that of a madhouse, in which the lighting system has suddenly failed and the inmates are on the rampage. Then, as one's eyes grow accustomed to the dim half-light and one's ears to the clamour, so one's nose is assailed by the bewildering variety of smells. That of spices usually predominates, and blends rather well with a background bouquet of camel-dung laced with charcoal fumes. To these add the nauseating reek of damp, half-cured leather, molten mutton-fat, and sweating human bodies, the pungent smell of garlic and asafoetida, and the aromas of musk, incense and cedar-wood, and the final result is that indefinable yet unmistakable something which, whether in Cairo, Tehran or Marrakesh, can only be described as plain 'bazaar smell'.

As for the crowds which frequent the bazaars, they represent a cross-section of the population of the particular region. But as I see them they fall into three main classes: children, people from the outside world, and the permanent denizens of these vaulted market places.

I am always filled with pity for the children, particularly the bazaar- and city-bred youngsters. So very many of them, despite their grimy faces and verminous ragged garments, are really beautiful, or would be if one could take them home and scrub them. Most pitiable of all, I think, are the children of metal-workers, scarcely more than toddlers, who ought to be playing in the sunshine. Instead, they are condemned to crouch in perpetual twilight, their puny hands clutching full-size hammers, as hour after hour they beat out sheets of brass or copper. They are in the process of initiation into a merciless lifelong drudgery. Other trades are equally strenuous, that of