

Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Tirol

Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

Fogg, William Perry

London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter XIV. Persia

CHAPTER XIV.

PERSIA.

Iranistan, the Land of the Shah—Its Climate—Picture of the Towns and Villages—Persian Costumes—A Convenient Disguise—Beauty a Poetical Myth—Situation of Bushire—English Cannon have Left their Mark—Darya-Beg, the “Lord of the Sea”—The Arsenal—A Yankee Gun—Persian Soldiers—How they Secure their Back Pay—Wind Towers—Jealousy of Foreigners—The Telegraph—A Costly Message—Persian Carpets—How they are Made—A Devil in Limbo—Water Carriers—Postage Stamps—A Bright Idea—A Persian Mint—The Shah’s Carriage—Island of Karnak—The Key of the Persian Gulf—A New Route to India—The “Wandering Jew” of the Mahometans.



THE Persia of to-day, ruled by the Shah, who still assumes the title of “King of Kings,” seems on the map but a small province, compared with the magnificent empire that once extended from the Mediterranean to the Indies. Its sovereign owes his throne to the successful raid of a Kurdish chieftain, a few generations ago, and is no more a descendant from Darius or Cyrus, than his capital is to be identified or compared with ancient Persepolis, the glories of which are handed down to us by the “Father of History,” or deciphered from the inscription on its ruined walls.

The names Arabia and Persia are not those by which these countries are known to their inhabitants. The Arabs call their country *Jezeret-al-Arab* "country of the Arabs." The Persians call it *Arabistan*. The word Persia comes from the Greek *Persis*. Their own name for their country is *Iranistan*. The climate of that part of Persia bordering on the Gulf and extending up to the mouth of the Euphrates, is exceedingly trying to Europeans, though perhaps not quite as unhealthy as India. The intense heat of summer is aggravated by the humidity of the atmosphere. In winter the winds are very cold and piercing. The saying is, that there is always too much wind or none at all.

The small towns are all very similar—a square fort of rough stone, with loop-holed bastions at the angles, or several detached round towers; the Sheik's house, and a few more of stone; others of mud, or mats made from date leaf stalks; a grove of date trees in the immediate vicinity, and a detached tower or two near the walls. These are the invariable features. The larger towns are walled round, and have a greater proportion of stone buildings. Nowhere is there the slightest pretense at ostentation on the outside of their buildings, public or private. Luxury and wealth may be profuse inside their homes, but none is shown to the public as a temptation to the spoiler.

The people are Mahometans, with a small sprinkling of Jews and native Christians. They belong to a sect quite different from the Arabs, and revere the memory of Ali almost as much as Mahomet. His tomb, near Bagdad, is one of their sacred shrines.

The common dress of the Persians, as seen in the streets, differs somewhat from any we have heretofore seen. A hat of black felt, without brim, or a large turban,

takes the place of the Arab *kaffeah*. Instead of the long striped *abbah* of camel's hair, they wear a loose robe of cotton or silk, with long sleeves, and a shawl tied around the waist, in the folds of which they carry their money and valuables. The wealthy have richly embroidered under vests, the outer robe being open from the throat to the waist. The women wear the universal loose, baggy gown, of white or dark blue cotton, and over the face a white mask in which is a small open-work space for the eyes. The disguise is so complete, that one might pass his own wife or sister in the street without recognizing her. It is said that this offers the greatest facility for intrigue, to which these Mahometan women are very much inclined. In the bazaars, especially those devoted to silks and wearing apparel, you see great numbers of females chaffering with the shop keepers. But the men pass them by without notice, as it is impossible to tell, unless they choose to raise the corner of their veils, whether they are white or black, ugly or beautiful. At home in the harems, the wealthy ladies are said to be very richly dressed, with a profusion of jewels and ornaments. In my travels in Mahometan countries, I have never yet seen a really beautiful woman. Circassian and Georgian females, who are especially admired for their large, liquid black eyes, and long silken lashes, over which the Persian poets go into ecstasies, are but handsome-faced animals, without education or intelligence. Refinement and intellect are attractions to them unknown, and would be unappreciated by their sensual masters. The children are remarkably pretty, with fair complexions, and very precocious.

I find myself in Bushire, the guest of an English merchant, whose house is three miles outside the walls, to which we ride out every night and return in the early morning. Bushire is the largest seaport in Persia, and has a

population of about twenty thousand. It is built upon a low point of land, and the water in the harbor is so shallow that all large vessels have to anchor three miles from the town. It is guarded towards the sea by many round detached towers. During the war with Persia in 1856, Bushire was bombarded and captured by the English, and these fortifications were badly shattered. They have never been repaired, and now seem utterly useless as a means of defense. A wall extends across the land side of the town, but it is half in ruins, and we ride out upon the plain through a gap made by British shot and shell.

The buildings are of a light, porous stone, the principal ones being the English Residency and the Persian Governor's palace. The latter personage is called by the sonorous title of *Darya-Beg*—"The Lord of the Sea." He is a near relative of the Shah, and rules with despotic sway over a large province. He has a garrison of regular Persian troops, and a few light field pieces. My guide took me one day to the arsenal near the palace, and pointed with much pride to a row of old iron cannon of European manufacture, mostly ship guns, mounted on rickety carriages of very primitive construction.

I am not well versed in artillery, but my impression is that there would be more danger behind than in front of them. I should think about half the charge would escape through the vent. There was, however, one very fine bronze six-pounder, on a modern carriage, with an inscription showing that it was a present to the Sultan of Muscat, from a firm of Boston merchants. How it came into the possession of the Persians I was unable to ascertain. I have noticed in several places the habit they have of posting several cannon quite unprotected, outside the walls of their forts, which seems about as sensible, in a military point of view, as digging a ditch inside the walls.

The soldiers are said to be patient, quick to learn, and all I have seen are tall, athletic-looking men—good material for a fine army. But their officers are unskilled and careless, and the discipline and drill are very bad. One regiment is posted outside the walls, and we passed it one evening at dress parade. Their arms are flint-lock muskets, and their uniform very shabby. They have not been paid for three years, as the finances of the country are in a chronic state of disorder. This part of Persia suffered frightfully during the famine three years ago, and the country is poor from successive short crops, so that the people cannot pay their taxes. The Governor is now absent in the interior, with a body of troops to enforce the payment of taxes due from some of the Sheiks, or local chiefs.

A regiment sent out not long ago on a similar mission, came back without any money for the Governor, but the officers and men had a valuable *loot* which they had appropriated to their own use as back pay. There are a few hundred Armenians in Bushire, who have the only Christian church, and within this enclosure, are the graves of several Englishmen. There are about twenty-five foreigners living here, inclusive of the British diplomatic Resident and his suite, the telegraph corps and one firm of English merchants. The restrictions placed by the government officers on the foreign trade are very annoying, although one principal source of revenue is the duties levied on imports. They are very jealous of the encroachments of foreigners, and with the history of India as a warning, they will not permit any but a native to acquire a title to real estate.

One peculiar feature in Bushire is the wind towers, rising like large chimneys ten or twelve feet above the flat roofs. These have openings towards the prevailing winds in summer, and conduct currents of air into the sleeping

rooms below. Many houses have a frame work of poles, covered with mats, upon their roofs, under which they sleep during the hot season. The air is full of moisture, and the fall of dew is so great that no one can sleep in the open air without some protection.

The India cable is landed here, and one line controlled by the English is carried overland to Teheran, the capital, and thence to Europe, while another cable connects Bushire with Fāu, at the mouth of the Euphrates, whence the Turks have a line through Bagdad to Aleppo and Constantinople. Reuter's telegrams pass through here to India, China, and Japan. As I listened to the click of the instrument working a through circuit to London, I was tempted to send a message, via London and New York, to Cleveland. The manager very kindly offered to send it at once; but when I came to count the cost—nearly forty dollars for ten words—I was obliged to decline.

The bazaars here are quite interesting and in many respects peculiar. The Persian merchants are active and enterprising. These people are very fond of sweets, and there are many stalls where "lollipops" are sold. I must confess a weakness for such things, which I never expect to outgrow. The variety and cheapness of these preparations, for which I can give no English names, and their delicious flavor surpassed anything I have ever seen in Europe or America. Human nature has many characteristics which can be recognized the world over. I thought of this, as I watched a bright-eyed little boy standing in front of the stall, with a copper coin in his chubby fist, and gazing wistfully up at the treasures, seemingly unable to decide in which one to invest.

The carpet bazaar, too, is very attractive. They spread out before me those beautiful fabrics, thick and soft, with that marvelous combination and blending of colors, which

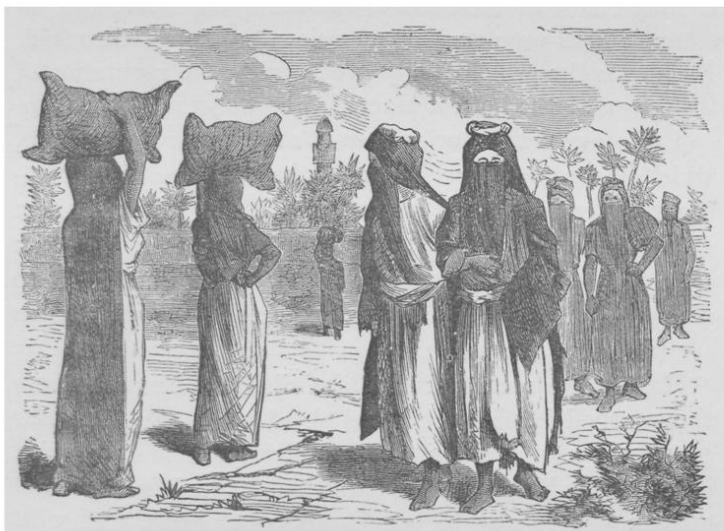
in Persian carpets is the admiration of the Western world, and causes the patterns to be copied in the looms of Europe and America. Like the shawls of Cashmere these carpets are made by hand in the interior villages, the wools being drawn through and through, as in the quilting days of our grandmothers, and the surface cut and shaved smooth and soft like velvet. It is one of the wonders of the East, that people so rude and uncultivated, should have such skill and taste in forms and colors. But nature here is prodigal in graceful shapes and colors pleasing to the eye. The feathery palm and the bright tints of tropical flowers and plants, are a constant suggestion of beauty to those who have no conception of what we call art.

In my investments, I ventured to offer not more than half the prices asked, which were always accepted after a proper amount of protests and hesitation. But when I exhibited my purchases to my host, he did not compliment me on any great bargains. I am well satisfied, however, provided Uncle Sam is not too hard in the matter of import duties.

At a street corner I noticed a round, dome-shaped pillar, about six feet high and two in diameter. "Here," my guide says, "a little devil is shut up." I am curious to know more about the evil spirit, and make an effort to examine into his abode, but he hurries me forward, as if afraid that the sable gentleman would break out and devour us.

Outside the walls the first mile is across a level, sandy plain. Then we came to cultivated land, slightly undulating, and covered with waving wheat and barley. In another month these fields will be harvested, and during the hot weather they will be parched and dry like a desert, except the few small oases around the wells, where vegetation is kept alive by irrigation.

All the water used in the town is brought from these wells, and we met long processions of women carrying goat skins filled with water, across the plain. They belong to the peasant class, and their life seems a hard one as they toil along in the hot sun, stooping under a burden of sixty or eighty pounds upon their heads, or strapped



WATER CARRIERS IN PERSIA.

to their shoulders. But it is a brighter side to the picture, when we pass others returning to the wells with empty goat skins, laughing and chattering among themselves, quite indifferent to the presence of strangers. They are mostly young, but hard toil and coarse living have left no traces of beauty in their forms or faces.

Though ice, as an article of domestic use, is unknown in this country, there is plenty of snow within sight, a tantalizing view in a climate as hot as this. On our left is a range of very lofty mountains. The highest peaks are from thirty to forty miles distant, and their snow-covered caps

loom up nearly ten thousand feet above the level of the sea. No vegetation can be seen upon their bare and deeply furrowed sides. They are separated by deep valleys, which are very fertile, and there is a belt of low land of varying width between these mountain ranges and the sea, which is called by the Persians the hot district. Situated at the southern foot of these hills, watered by no river, and its summer heat tempered by no rain, this district in which Bushire is the principal city, well merits the reputation of being one of the hottest places in the world.

There are many stories current among Europeans here, which illustrate the inefficiency of the Shah and his government. I cannot vouch for their truth, and this may be a good place to quote the adage, "believe nothing that you hear and but half you see." They are, however, so characteristic of these Eastern princes, that I give them for what they are worth.

During the recent visit of the Shah to Europe, where the crowned heads were so delighted to do him honor, he saw postage stamps for the first time, and their use was explained to him. The bright idea struck him that here was an opportunity to benefit his own people, and what was of more importance, make some money for himself. So he ordered a large quantity of postage stamps, which he had printed in Paris, and forwarded to Teheran. As there are no post-offices in Persia, it cannot be expected that he will realize a very large sum from the sale of stamps.

The coinage of Persia is principally silver *kerans*, value about one franc. They are made by hand, of unalloyed silver. Of course, a mint would be a convenient institution. So one was ordered, with all its expensive machinery, six years ago, from Europe. It came by sea as far as Bushire, and after much delay and difficulty, the

heavy and cumbrous machine was started by caravan towards the capital. It got stuck fast in a mountain pass about one hundred miles from here, and there it has remained ever since. An elegant English carriage designed for the use of the Shah's harem, is said to have met the same fate.

About thirty miles from Bushire is the island of Karrack, the most important strategic point in the Persian Gulf. This island is ten miles long by three in width. It has about three thousand inhabitants, and a considerable portion of the land is under cultivation. The highest point is nearly three hundred feet above the sea, and it is quite healthy for Europeans, with an abundance of good water. In event of the opening of a new route to India, by the Euphrates Valley Railway, which, if ever constructed, must be built by British capital, this island will be seized and fortified by the English like another Aden. It is perhaps the only spot in the Persian Gulf which is in every way suitable for permanent military occupation. It commands on the one hand the largest sea-port of Persia, and on the other, the mouth of the Euphrates, and through it, the immense territories of Turkish Arabia and Mesopotamia. Karrack was occupied temporarily by British troops during the Persian war in 1856. As we steamed past the island we could see the remains of a fort built in 1754 by the Dutch, who then had a flourishing settlement here. Upon the rising ground west of the fort, is a tomb with a mosque attached. It is the shrine of Mir Mahomet, the son of Ali, the conqueror of Persia. An inscription states that it was rebuilt five hundred and fifty years ago. There are several other shrines on the island, in one of which is the impression of the foot of the prophet Al Khizir, who, according to Mahometan tradition, is still alive and on his travels over the world, like the wandering Jew.