

The Shah's English Gardener

Elizabeth Gaskell

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The facts of the following narration were communicated to me by Mr. Burton, the head gardener at Teddesley Park, in Staffordshire. I had previously been told that he had been for a year or two in the service of the Shah of Persia; and this induced me to question him concerning the motives which took him so far from England, and the kind of life which he led at Teheran. I was so much interested in the details he gave me, that I made notes at the time, which have enabled me to draw up the following account: —

Mr. Burton is a fine-looking, healthy man, in the prime of life, whose appearance would announce his nation all the world over. He had completed his education as a gardener at Knight's, when, in 1848, an application was made to him, on behalf of the Shah of Persia, by Colonel Sheil, the English envoy at the court of Teheran; who proposed to Mr. Burton that he should return to Persia with the second Persian secretary to the embassy, Mirza Oosan Koola, and take charge of the Royal Gardens at Teheran, at a salary of a hundred pounds a year, with rooms provided for him, and an allowance of two shillings a day for the food of himself and the native servant whom he would find it necessary to employ. This prospect, and the desire, which is so natural to young men, to see countries beyond their own, led Mr. Burton to accept the proposal. The Mirza Oosan Koola and he left Southampton on the twenty-ninth of September, 1848, and went by steam to Constantinople. Thence they journeyed without accident to the capital of Persia. The seat of government was removed to Teheran about seventy years ago, when the Kujur dynasty became possessed of the Persian throne. Their faction was predominant in the North of Persia, and they, consequently, felt more secure in Teheran than in the ancient southern capital Teheran is situated in the midst of a wide plain, from two to three hundred miles long, which has a most dreary appearance, being totally uncultivated, and the soil of which is a light kind of reddish loam, that becomes pulverised after a long continuance of dry weather, and then rises as great clouds of sand, sometimes even obscuring the sun several hours in a day for several successive clays.

Bad news awaited Mr. Burton on his arrival at Teheran. The Shah, who had commissioned Colonel Sheil to engage an English gardener, was dead. His successor cared little either about gardening or his predecessor's engagements. Colonel Sheil was in England. Mr. Burton's heart sank a little within him; but, having a stout English spirit, and great faith in the British embassy, he insisted on a partial fulfilment of the contract. Until this negotiation was completed, Mr. Burton was lodged in the house of Mirza Ocean Koola. Mr. Burton was, therefore, for a month, a member of a Persian household belonging to one of the upper middle classes.

The usual mode of living in one house seemed pretty nearly the same in all that fell under the range of Mr. Burton's observation. The Persians get up at sunrise, when they have a cup of coffee. The few hours in the day in which they condescend to labour in any way, are from sunrise until seven or eight o'clock in the morning. After that, the heat becomes so intense (frequently one hundred and eight or one hundred and nine degrees in the shade) that all keep within doors, lying about on mats in passages or rooms. At ten they have their first substantial meal; which consists of mutton and rice, stewed together in a rude saucepan over a charcoal fire, built out of doors. Sometimes, in addition to this dish, they have a kind of soup, or "water-meat" (which is the literal translation of the Persian name), made of water, mutton, onions, parsley, fowls, rice, dried fruits, apricots, almonds, and walnuts, stewed together. But this, as we may guess from the multiplicity of the ingredients, is a dainty dish. At four o'clock, the panting Persians, nearly worn out by the heat of the day, take a cup of strongly perfumed tea, with a little bitter-orange juice squeezed into it; and after this tonic they recover strength enough to smoke and lounge. Dinner was the grand meal of the day, to which they invited friends. It was not unlike breakfast, but was preceded by a dessert, at which wine was occasionally introduced, but which always consisted of melons and dried fruits. The dinner was brought in on a pewter tray; but Mr. Burton remarked that the pewter dishes were very dingy. A piece of common print was spread on the ground, and cakes of bread put on it. They had no spoons for the soup, or "water-meat," but soaked their bread in it, or curled it round into a hollow shape, and fished up

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what they could out of the abyss. At the Mirza's they bad spoons for the sour goat's-milk, with ice, which seemed to be one of their delicacies. The ice is brought down from the mountains, and sold pretty cheaply in the bazaars. Sugar and salt are eaten together with this iced sour goat's-milk. Smoking narghilahs beguiles the evening hours very pleasantly. They pluck a quantity of rose-blossoms and put them into the water through which the smoke passes; but the roses last in season only a month. Mirza Ocean Koola had a few chairs in the house for the use of the gentlemen of the Embassy.

At last the negotiation respecting Mr. Burton's engagement was ended. His friends at the Embassy bad insisted that the present Shah should install him in the office of royal gardener at the salary proposed by his predecessor. Accordingly, about a month after his arrival at Teheran, he took possession of two rooms, appropriated to his use, in the garden of El Kanai. This garden consisted of six acres, with a mud-wall all around. There were avenues of fruit-trees planted, with lucerne growing under them, which was cut for the food of the horses in the royal stable; but the lucerne and the trees gave this royal garden very much the aspect of an English orchard, and must have been a very disenchanting prospect for a well-trained gardener, accustomed to our flower-beds, and vegetable-gardens. The fruit trees were apricots, apples, pears, and cherries — the latter of the same description as ours, but finer in quality; the apricots were of a kind which Mr. Burton had never seen before, with large sweet kernels. He brought some of the stones with him to England, and gave them to his old master, Mr. Knight. If this square plot of orchard-ground, surrounded by a mud-wall, was the cheerless prospect outside, the two rooms which Mr. Burton was to inhabit were not much more attractive. Bare of all furniture, with floors of mud and chaff beaten together, they did not even contain the mats which play so many parts in Persian houses. Mr. Burton's first care was to purchase mats, and hire a servant to market and cook for him. The people at the Embassy sent him the various bales of seeds, roots, and implements, which he had brought with him from England; and he hoped before long to introduce some improvements into Persian gardening; so little did he as yet know the nature of the people with whom he had to deal. But before he was well settled in his two rooms, while he was yet unpacking his English bales, some native plasterers told him that, outside of his wooden door (which fastened only with a slight chain), six men lay in wait for him to do him evil, partly prompted by the fact of his being a foreigner, partly in hopes of obtaining possession of some of the contents of these bales.

It was two miles to the Embassy, and Mr. Burton was without a friend nearer; his very informants would not stand by him, but would rather rejoice in his discomfiture. But, being a brave, resolute man, he picked out a scythe from among his English implements, threw open the door, and began to address the six men (who, sure enough, lay crouched near the entrance) in the best Persian he could muster. His Persian eloquence, or possibly the sight of the scythe wielded by a stout, resolute man, produced the desired effect: the six men, fortunately, went away, without having attacked him, for any effort at self-defence on his part would have strengthened the feeling of hostility already strong against him. Once more, he was left in quiet to unpack his goods, with such shaded light as two windows, covered over with paper and calico, could give. But when his tools were unpacked — tools selected with such care and such a hoping heart in England — who were to use them? The men appointed as gardeners under him would not work, because they were never paid. If Mr. Burton made them work, he should pay them, they said. At length he did persuade them to labour, during the hours in which exertion was possible, even to a native. Mr. Burton began to inquire how these men were paid, or if their story was true, that they never were. It was true that wages for labour done for the Shah were most irregularly given. And, when the money could no longer be refused, it was paid in the form of bills upon some gate to a town, or some public bath, a hundred or a hundred and twenty miles away, such gates and baths being royal property. Honest payment of wages being rare, of course stealing is plentiful; and it is even winked at by the royal officers. The gardeners under Mr. Burton, for instance, would gather the flowers he bad cherished with care, and present them to any chief who came into the Baugh-el-Kanai; and the present they received in turn constituted their only means of livelihood. Sometimes, Mr. Burton was the sole labourer in this garden, and he had the charge of Baugh-el-Colleza, twenty square acres in size, and at some distance from El Kanai, where he lived. When the hot weather came on, he fell ill of diarrhea, and for three months lay weary and ill on his mat, unable to superintend, if there were gardeners, or to work himself, if there were none.

After he recovered, he seems to have been hopeless of doing any good in such a climate, and among such a people. The Shah took little interest in horticulture. He sometimes came into the gardens of El Kanai (in which his palace was situated), and would ask, some questions, through an interpreter, in a languid, weary kind of way.

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Sometimes, when Mr. Burton had any vegetables ready, he requested leave to present them himself to the Shah; when this was accorded, he wove a basket out of the twigs of the white poplar (the tree which most abounded on the great barren plain surrounding Teheran); and, filling this with lettuces, or peas, or similar garden produce, he was ushered with much ceremony into one of the courts ("small yards," as Mr. Burton once irreverently called them) belonging to the palace. There, in a kind of balcony projecting from one of the windows, the Shah sat; and the English gardener, without shoes, but with the lamb's-skin fez covering his head, bowed low three times, as he gave up his basket to be handed to the Shah. Mr. Burton did not perform the Persian salaam, considering such a slave-like obeisance unbefitting a European. The Shah received these baskets of vegetables, some of which were new to him, with great indifference, not caring to ask any questions. The spirit of curiosity, however, was alive in the harem, if nowhere else; and, one day, Mr. Burton was surprised to receive a command to go and sow some annuals in one of the courts of the harem, for such was the Queen-mother's desire. So, taking a few packets of common flower-seeds, he went through some rooms in the palace, before he arrived at the courts, which open one out of another. These rooms Mr. Burton considered as little better, whether in size, construction, or furniture, than his own garden-dwelling; but there are some apartments in this royal palace which are said to be splendid — one lined with plate-glass, and several fitted up with the beautiful painted windows for which Persia is celebrated. On entering the courts belonging to the harem, Mr. Burton found himself attended by three or four soldiers and two eunuchs — all with drawn swords, which they made a little parade of holding above him, rather to his amusement, especially as he seems to have had occasional glimpses of peeping ladies, who ought rather to have had the swords held over them. Before pawing from one yard to another, one or two soldiers would precede him, to see that the coast was clear. And if a veiled lady chanced, through that ignorance which is bliss all the world over, to come into the very yard where he was, the soldiers seized him, huddled him into a dark corner, and turned his face to the wall; she, meanwhile, passing through under the cover of her servant's large cloak, something like a chicken peeping from under the wing of the hen. Whatever might have been their danger from the handsome young Englishman, he, at least, was not particularly attracted, by their appearance. The utmost praise he could bestow was, that "one or two were tolerably good-looking;" and, on being pressed for details, he said that those ladies of the harem of whom he caught a glimpse resembled all other Persian women, in having very large features, very coarse complexions, and large eyes. They (as well as the men) paint the eyebrows, so as to make them appear to meet. They are stoutly-built. Such were the observations which Mr. Burton made, as he was passing through the yards, or courts, which led into the small garden where he was to sow his flower-seeds. Here the Queen-mother sat in a projecting balcony; but, as soon as she saw the stranger, she drew back. She is about thirty-five years of age, and possesses much influence in the country; which, as she is a cruel and ambitious woman, has produced great evils.

One day, Mrs. Sheil's maid, who had accompanied her mistress on a visit to the ladies in the harem, fell in with a Frenchwoman who had been an inhabitant there for more than twenty years. She seemed perfectly contented with her situation, and had no wish to exchange it for any other.

Every now and then Mr. Burton sent flowers to the harem: such as he could cultivate in the dry, hot garden, with no command of labour. Marvel of Peru, African marigolds, single stocks, and violets planted along the sides of the walks between planes and poplars, were the flowers he gathered to form his nosegays. But all gardening was weary and dreary work; partly owing to the great heat of the climate, partly to the scarcity of water, but most especially because there was no service or assistance to be derived from any other man. The men appointed to assist him grew more careless and lazy than ever as time rolled on; he had no means of enforcing obedience, or attention, and, if he had had, he would not have dared to use it, and so to increase the odium that attached to him as a foreigner. Moreover, no one cared whether the gardens flourished or decayed. If it had not been for the kindness of some of the English residents, among whom he especially mentioned Mr. Reads, his situation would have been utterly intolerable.

There was nothing in the external life of the place which could compensate for his individual disappointment; at least, he perceived nothing. One day, in crossing the market-place, he saw eight men lying with their heads cut off; executed for being religious fanatics, who had assumed the character of prophets. At another time, there were six men put to death for highway robbery; and the mode of death was full of horror, whatever their crimes might be. They were hung head downwards, with the right arm and leg cut off; one of them dragged out life in this state for three days. Even the minor punishments are cruel and vindictive, as they always are where the power and

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execution of the laws is uncertain. One of the penalties inflicted for slight offences, is to have a string passed through the nostrils, and to be led for three successive days through the bazaars and market-places by a crier, proclaiming the nature of the misdemeanour committed. Blindness is very common: Mr. Burton has often seen six or eight blind men walking in a string, each with his right arm on the shoulder of his precursor. It is partly caused by ophthalmia, produced by the dust, and partly due to the Shah having it in his power to inflict the punishment of pulling out both, or one of, the eyes. The great-grandfather of the present Shah, Aga Mohammed, the founder of the Kujur dynasty, had large baskets—full of the eyes of his enemies presented to him after his accession to the throne.

Let us change the subject to attar of roses; though all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten the memory of that last sentence. Attar of roses is made and sold in the bazaars; the rose employed is the common single pink one, which must be gathered before the sudden rise of the hot sun causes the dew to evaporate. By the side of the attar-sellers may be seen the Jew, selling trinkets; the Armenians — Christians in name, and, as such, bound by no laws of Mohammed — selling a sweetish red wine and arrakee, a spirit made from the refuse of grapes and resembling gin; while through the bazaars men go, having leathern bags on their backs containing bad, dirty water, and a lump of ice in a basin, into which they pour out draughts for their customers. Ice is brought down from the mountains, and sold at the rate of a large lump for two or three pools — a pool being a small copper coin, of which thirty make one koraun (silver), value eleven—pence; and ten korauns make one tomaun, a gold coin of the value of nine shillings. The drinking-water is procured from open drains, or from tanks, in which all the washing the Persians ever give their clothes is done. They use no soap even for shaving; but soapy water would be preferable to the beverage obtained from these sources, with vermin floating on its surface. No wonder that the cholera returns every three years, and is a fatal scourge; especially when we learn that the doctors and barbers in Teheran, as formerly in England, unite the two professions and that the great resource in all cases of illness is the lancet.

Besides the shops in the bazaars, where provisions and beverages of various kinds are sold, there are others for silks, carpets, embroidered pieces, something like the Indian shawls, but smaller in size, and purchased by the Europeans for waistcoats; and Cashmere shawls, which even there, and though not always new, bear the high prices of from fifty pounds to one hundred pounds. Those which were presented to the ladies of the Embassy were worth, at Teheran, one hundred pounds apiece. There are also lamb's—skin caps, or fezzes, about half a yard high, conical in shape, and open, or crownless, at the top; heavier than a hat, but much cooler, owing to the ventilation produced by this opening. No Europeans wear hats, except one or two at the Embassy. Cotton materials are used for dresses by the common people, manufactured at Teheran. There are very few articles of British manufacture Bold in the bazaars; but French, German, and Russian things abound. A fondness for watches seems to be a Persian weakness; some of the higher classes will wear two at a time, like the English dandies sixty years ago; and sometimes both these watches will be in a state of stand—still. It is therefore no wonder that a little German watchmaker, who is settled at Teheran, is making his fortune. The mode of reckoning time is from sunrise to sunset — prayers being said by the faithful before each of these. The day and night are each divided into "watches" of three hours long; subdividing the time between sunrise and mid—day, mid—day and sunset.

Mr. Burton saw little of the religious ceremonies of the Persians. He had never been inside a mosque; but had seen people saying their prayers at the appointed times (at the expiration of every watch through the day, he believed), on raised platforms, erected for the purpose, up and down the town. The form of washing the hands before they say their prayers is gone through by country-people on the dusty plain, using soil instead of water — the more purifying article of the two, one would suppose, after hearing Mr. Burton's account of the state of the drains and tanks in Teheran. The priests are recognised by the white turbans which they wear as a class distinction; and our English gardener does not seem to have come in contact with any of them, excepting in occasional rencontres in the streets; where the women, veiled and shrouded, shuffle along — their veils being transparent just at the eyes, so as to enable them to see without being seen; while their clumsy, shapeless mantles effectually prevent all recognition, even from husband or father. The higher class (the wives of Mirzas, or noblemen) are conveyed in a kind of covered hand—barrow from place to place. This species of rude carriage will hold two ladies sitting upright, and has a small door on either side; it is propelled by one before and one behind.

As long as these national peculiarities were novel enough to excite curiosity, Mr. Burton had something to relieve the monotony of his life, which was very hopeless in the horticultural line. By—and—by it sank into great

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sameness. The domestic changes were of much the same kind as the Vicar of Wakefield's migration from the blue bed to the brown: for three or four months in the hot season, Mr. Burton conveyed his mat up the mud-staircase, which led from his apartments through a trap-door on to the flat roof, and slept there. When the hot weather was over, Mr. Burton came down under cover. He felt himself becoming utterly weary and enervated; and probably wondered less than he had done on his first arrival at the lazy way in which the natives worked; sitting down, for instance, to build a wall. Indifference, which their religion may dignify in some things into fatalism, seemed to prevail everywhere and in every person. They ate their peas and beans unshelled, rather than take any unnecessary trouble; a piece of piggism which especially scandalised him.

Twice in the year there were great religious festivals, which roused the whole people into animation and enthusiasm. One in the spring was the Noorooz, when a kind of miracle-play was acted simultaneously upon the various platforms in the city; the grandest representation of all being in the market-place, where thirty or forty thousand attended. The subject of this play is the death of the sons of Ali; the Persians being Sheeah, or followers of Ali, and, as such, regarded as schismatics by the more orthodox Turks, who do not believe in the three successors of Mohammed. This "mystery" is admirably performed, and excites the Persians to passionate weeping. A Frank ambassador is invariably introduced, who comes to intercede for the sons of Ali. This is the tradition of the Persians; and, although not corroborated by any European legend, it is so faithfully believed in by the Persians, that it has long procured for the Europeans a degree of kindly deference, very different from the feeling with which they are regarded by the Ali-hating Turks. The other religious festival occurs some time in August, and is of much the same description; some event (Mr. Burton believed it was the death of Mohammed) being dramatised, and acted in all the open public places. The weeping and wailing are as general at this representation as at the other. Mr. Burton himself said, "he was so out up by it, he could not help crying;" and excused himself for what he evidently considered a weakness, by saying that everybody there was doing the same.

Sometimes the Shah rode abroad; he and his immediate attendants were well mounted; but behind, around, came a rabble rout to the number of one, two, or even three thousand, on broken-down horses, on mules, on beggarly donkeys, or running on foot, their rags waving in the wind, everybody, anybody, anyhow. The soldiers in attendance did not contribute to the regularity or uniformity of the scene, as there is no regulation height, and the dwarf of four feet ten jostles his brother in arms who towers above him at the stature of six feet six.

In strange contrast with this wild tumult and disorderly crowd must be one of the Shah's amusements, which consists in listening to Mr. Burgess (the appointed English interpreter), who translates the Times, Illustrated News, and, occasionally, English books, for the pleasure of the Shah. One wonders what ideas certain words convey, representative of the order and uniform regularity of England.

In October, 1849, Colonel Shiel returned to Teheran, after his sojourn in England; and soon afterwards it was arranged that Mr. Burton should leave Persia, and shorten his time of engagement to the Shah by one-half. Accordingly, as soon as he had completed a year in Teheran, he began to make preparations for returning to Europe; and about March, 1850, he arrived at Constantinople, "where he remained another twelvemonth. The remembrance of Mr. Burton's Oriental life must be in strange contrast to the regular, well-ordered comfort of his present existence.

(1852)