
VÁMBÉRY, Ármin

In Herat and Beyond It

Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913) was a Hungarian orientalist and traveller. Based on his extensive linguistic and other studies, travels and other experience, he strongly advocated the theory of a close Turkish-Hungarian linguistic relationship.

Between 1861 and 1864 he travelled from Constantinople, disguised as a Sunnite dervish, through Persia and Central Asia. During his travel he visited among others Trebizond, Tabriz, Zanzan, Kazvin, Shiraz, Ispahan, Khiva, Bokhara, Samarkand, and Herat. This was the first journey of its kind undertaken by a European. He then paid a visit to London, where he was treated as a celebrity because of his daring adventures and knowledge of languages. We present here a chapter from his book *'His Life and Adventures'* published by T. Fisher Unwin (London, 1889).

The large, flourishing valley, intersected by canals, in the centre of which the city of Herat is situated, is called *Djolghei-Herat* (the Plain of Herat). I saw with surprise how rapidly the wounds inflicted by war had healed. But two months ago savage Afghan hordes had been camping in the neighbourhood, trampling down and laying waste everything, and behold! to-day the fields and vineyards are boasting of their intensest verdure, and the meadows are covered with a luxuriant sward dotted all over with field-flowers, making them look like embroidered work.

We entered by the gate of *Dervaze-Irak* (viz., the Gate of Irak). The gate itself and the houses surrounding it were one mass of ruins. Not far from the gate, in the interior of the city, was a lofty fortification, which, owing to its phenomena, was more particularly exposed to the hostile missiles, and now there was nothing left of it but a heap of stones. The wooden framework from door and window was gone, it having been used up as fuel, of which there was great scarcity in the city during the siege. In the deserted openings of the houses were seen naked Afghans and Hindoos squatting, worthy keepers of a city in ruins. At every step I advanced the desolation became more appalling; entire quarters of the town were empty and deserted. The bazaar alone, or rather that part of it covered with the cupola, which has withstood many a siege, presented an interesting picture of life characteristic of the confluence of Persia, India, and Central Asia at this place. It was a wonderful sight to see the astonishing variety of types, complexions, and costumes amongst Afghans, Hindoos, Turkomans, Persians, and Jews. The Afghan, whose national costume consists of a shirt, drawers, and a dirty blanket, assumes sometimes the English red coat, but on his head he wears the never-failing picturesque Hindoo-Afghan turban. The more civilized affect in part the Persian dress. Arms are the universal fashion; private citizens as well as soldiers seldom come to the bazaar without sword and shield, and persons wishing to look distinguished carry with them a whole arsenal. The Afghan is both in appearance and demeanour the rudest and most savage, every one passing him with a great show of humility, but never did people hate a conqueror more intensely than those of Herat the Afghan. The surging, variegated crowd before me was pleasant to look at. There were moments when, seeing Afghan soldiers in English uniforms and with shakos on their heads, I thought that after all I was now in a country where I had nothing to fear

from Islamite fanaticism, and that I might drop the mask which had become intolerable to me. But only for a moment, for upon reflection I could not help remembering that I was in the East, where appearances are most deceptive.

As I mentioned before, my purse was quite empty. I tried everything in my power to procure myself the necessary travelling expenses. I waited upon the reigning prince, Serdar Mehemed Yakub Khan, a youth sixteen years old, and the son of the then king of Afghanistan. The king had entrusted this youth with the government of the conquered province, he having had to hasten to Kabul where his own brothers were plotting to deprive him of his throne. The young prince was residing in a palace very much battered by the siege. He was dressed in a uniform with a high-standing collar, and would sit, most of the time, in an arm-chair at the window: and when wearied with the great number of petitioners which it was his official duty to receive, he would order military drills and manoeuvres to be executed on the place below his window and inspect them from there.

As I was stepping into the courtyard of the palace in the company of Mollah Ishak, the military drill was just at its height. Near the door of the reception hall a crowd of servants, military men and petitioners were lounging. Thanks to my huge turban and pilgrim-like appearance every one made way for me, and I could reach the hall without interference from anybody. When I stepped into the hall I found the prince seated as usual in his arm-chair, with the Vizier on his right side, whilst ranged along the wall were standing other officers, mollahs, and people from Herat. In front of the prince were the keeper of the seal and four or five servants. As became my position as a dervish I entered with the customary salutation, and exciting no sort of comment by it, I went up straight to the prince, seating myself between him and the Vizier, after having pushed aside the latter, a stout Afghan, to make room for me. There was a general laugh at this intermezzo, but I kept my countenance and immediately raised my hand to recite my customary prayer. The prince looked at me fixedly during tlic prayer. I observed an expression of surprise and hesitation stealing over his face, and after I had said "Amen," and the whole company smoothing their beards responded to it, he jumped up from his chair, and pointing at me with his finger, he exclaimed, laughing and yet half astonished, "I swear by God, thou art an Englishman!"

A loud burst of laughter followed the original remark of the young prince, but he, in no wise disconcerted, approached, stood up in front of me, and then clapping his hands like a child who had guessed right at something he added, "Let me be thy victim! confess thou art an Ingiliz in disguise." But I now pretended to act as if the joke had been carried too far for my forbearance, and said: "*Sahib mekum* (stop this); dost thou know the proverb — 'he who even in fun takes a true believer to be an unbeliever, becomes one himself?' Give me rather something for iny *fatiha* that I may continue my journey." My grave looks and the citation made by me somewhat perplexed the young prince, and sitting down again, half ashamed of himself, he excused himself by saying that he had never seen a dervish from Bokhara with such features. I answered him that I was not from Bokhara but from Constantinople; and having shown him as a proof my passport and spoken to him about his cousin Djelaleddin Khan, who had visited Mecca and Constantinople in 1860 and met with a most distinguished reception on the part of the Sultan, he seemed to be perfectly satisfied. My passport passed from hand to hand, everybody approved

of its contents, and the prince giving me a couple of krans called upon me to visit him again whilst I remained in Herat, an invitation of which I did not fail to avail myself.¹

Time dragged on heavily while I was waiting for a caravan at Herat, and I grew very impatient at the delay. There was a sad and depressing air about the city, terror of the savage conqueror could be read in every face, and the recent siege and devastation continued to form the ever-recurring topics of conversation. At length, on the 10th of November, 1863, I left this entrance-gate to Central Asia, joining a larger caravan going to Meshed, with which I was to accomplish the remaining portion of my journey. The caravan consisted of two thousand persons, half of whom were Hezares from Kabul who, for the most part poor and miserable, were proceeding with their kith and kin on a pilgrimage to the shrines of Shi-ite saints. The caravan forming thus a large body of men, its members were subdivided again into smaller bands. I was assigned to a troop of Afghans from Kandahar, who were dealing in furs and indigo, and were conveying these articles of merchandise to Persia.

I thought that I had emptied the cup of bitter sufferings to the very dregs during my wandering through Central Asia, but it was reserved for the journey from Herat to Meshed to convince me that there may be miseries greater still than those I had already endured. I was utterly destitute of money, of everything, and to satisfy my daily wants I was thrown upon the charity of the Afghans and Tadjiks. The Tadjiks were poor pilgrims, themselves but scantily supplied with the bare necessities of life. And as to the Afghans, their known avarice and meanness of character might give me a dispensation from telling how hard it was to excite their pity. I fared best when we happened to pitch our tents near some inhabited village. In such a case my Tartar and I divided the village between us; I would go in one direction and beg for wood and fuel, whilst he would go in another begging for bread and flour, and on meeting again we would exchange parts.

The inhabitants of this region, though very poor themselves, did not turn a deaf ear to our appeals for charity. With food we were tolerably supplied, poor and mean as it was in quality; but what caused us the most terrible suffering was the bitter cold prevailing towards autumn in this part of the world. Such was the effect of the cold cutting blasts coming from the north-eastern plains that the intense cold would pierce through the thickest cloak in which a person might wrap himself; and the animals themselves came very near being benumbed by it. All the way from Shebesh until we were two stations from Meshed, I had to pass the night in the open air, lying on the hard frozen ground, in the ragged dervish dress which I had on me, and which served the purposes of both pillow and coverlet. Many a time I would not dare to close my eyes for fear of freezing to death. I besought the hard-hearted Afghans to let me have one of their spare horse blankets; with chattering teeth and in a most piteous voice I vainly appealed for hours together to the cruel barbarians bundled up in their warm fur skin cloaks. They only jeered at me, saying, "Dance, hadji, and thou wilt get warm." The high plateaus of Eastern Persia will for ever rank in my memory with the sand of the deserts of Central Asia.

Near Kafir-Kale we met with a caravan coming from Meshed. From a member of this caravan I learned that Colonel Dolmage, an English officer in the Persian service, an old acquaintance of mine, was

¹ It was the same prince who afterwards succeeded his father Shir Ali Khan upon the throne of Kabul. In spite of having proved himself at the beginning of his career to be a valiant soldier, he nevertheless turned afterwards a cowardly man by participating in the murder of Sir Louis Cavagnari and the rest of the English officers who took part in the British Mission to Kabul.

still residing in Meshed, a piece of news which was very welcome to me. Ferimon was the first village inhabited by Persians, and a warm stable made me forget the sufferings of many a day past. At length, on the twelfth day after our departure from Herat, the gilded cupolas of Imam Riza loomed up before our eyes. We had reached the city of Meshed, for the sight of which I had been longing.

Besides, in approaching Meshed, there were other motives — motives of humanity — at play, which quickened my pulse and made my heart beat with something of the regained dignity of a man who escapes from moral slavery. In Meshed I was at length to be restored to myself; I was to fling off, to some extent, the artful disguises with which, in fear of life, limb and liberty, I had had to surround myself, to discard the shameful rags which lowered me in my own estimation, to put an end to the pitiful anxieties to which I had been continually exposed, and last not least to exchange a life of hardship, discomforts and privations for one of comparative ease and comfort. Nor did I entertain the usual fears, which haunted me elsewhere, as to the reception I might meet at the hands of the authorities; the governor of the province was an enlightened prince, an uncle of the king of Persia, and under his auspices the government was conducted, in appearance at least, more in accordance with European ideas. To all these cheering reflections was added the hope of meeting and embracing again, after all these weary wanderings, an old friend of mine — perhaps the solitary European who had pitched his tent so far east and was now living in Meshed. Under all these combined impressions the very cupola, under which the mortal remains of Imam Riza repose, blazing with its resplendent light far into the outlying country, seemed to me a beacon which was to guide me to a harbour of safety. I even caught the enthusiasm of the thousands of people who were flocking to the tomb of the saint, and could almost imagine myself one of the pilgrims who hail with emotions of unutterable thankfulness and pious joy the sight of the holy place, after having wearily wandered over the immense distances from their several homes.

It may not be uninteresting to know who this Imam Riza is, the renown of whose sanctity has made such a lasting and deep impression upon the minds of a large portion of the Eastern world. Of the twelve Imams he is the eighth. He was a contemporary of the Caliph Maamun, a son of the famous Harun el Rashid. This Caliph's envy and jealousy of Imam Riza was roused by the general esteem in which he was held, and the unbounded devotion which was shown to him by the sect of Shi-ites, then already very numerous, but not daring yet to enter publicly into the area of religious sectarianism. He was banished by the Caliph to Tus, a town in the vicinity of the present site of Meshed. The banishment had not the desired effect; in his abode of humiliation he became again the object of general veneration, so the Caliph had poison administered to him in a cup of wine, thus ridding himself of a dangerous and hated rival. The memory of his name did not die with him; from a beloved leader of a sect he rose to be a martyred saint. His death in exile seems to have especially commended him to the imagination of the travelling public as their patron saint; and he was honoured, in this, his quality, with the title of Sultan al Gureba (Prince of Strangers).

