CHAPTER I

Firdausi & the Shāhnāma

Firdausi was born at Tus in north-eastern Persia about A.D. 935, and came of an old Iranian family of landed proprietors. His claim to fame rests largely on his Shāhnāma, or Book of Kings, which comprises nearly 60,000 couplets of flowing Persian verse, and where nearly four thousand years of Persia’s history is chronicled. The poet seems to have spent thirty-four years of his life on his great work, which he commenced when he was forty and completed just before his death in A.D. 1025. His main aim throughout was to glorify the national history of his fatherland and its folk, whether in myth, story, religious tradition or popular tale.

We learn from Firdausi himself that the material for the Shāhnāma had already (about A.D. 640) been embodied in a Pahlavi prose epic, the Khvātāi-nāmak, or Book of Sovereigns, and that it was a young poet named Dakiki, an early contemporary of his, who first conceived the idea of turning it into verse. No sooner had he commenced the work, however, when he was murdered, and Firdausi, though admitting his inferiority as a poet, took it in hand, and after many setbacks was able at last to carry it through successfully.

Firdausi has followed tradition by dividing the annals into four periods, each marked by a succession of kings. These are (1) the Pishdadian period, from the earliest times to about 1000 B.C.; (2) the Kaianian period from about
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1000 B.C. to 330 B.C., and comprising the historic Median (708–558 B.C.) and the Achaemenian (558–330 B.C.) rule; (3) the Ashkanian or Parthian period, from 330 B.C. to A.D. 225; and (4) the Sasanian period, from A.D. 226 to A.D. 651.

I have already mentioned that this book is written to stress the important part played by women in Persian history, as depicted in Firdausi’s poem. In the earlier periods of the epic it is natural that the feminine figures are somewhat shadowy, but the poet’s touch is not lacking in fancy. Later, when his material was less scanty, his characters become more individualistic and clear-cut. Firdausi, however, at no time forgot either his sympathy or his poetic art in dealing with his female characters. He sought most of all to paint an ideal type of the eternal feminine in Persia, and we may rightly treasure the picture, the outlines of which have been given such an enduring form through his poetic skill.
THE PISHDADIAN PERIOD

From the earliest times to about 1000 B.C.
CHAPTER II

FARANAK

Faranak, daughter of the King of the Scythians, became the wife of Abtin,¹ a descendant of the great Iranian King, Jamshid. She had fallen in love with Abtin when he came to her father’s court during his travels.

Shortly before the birth of her son Faridun, Zahhak, the demon-like King of Babylon, who had usurped the throne of Persia, had been terrified by a dream, in which he saw himself taken prisoner and ignominiously dethroned by a kingly and valiant youth. Greatly disturbed in his mind as to the meaning of the vision, he summoned the wisest of his archmages and astrologers. He commanded them to look into the future and foretell what would be his fate. Fearful as to the manner in which he might visit his wrath upon them, the sages were loth to speak until, after three days, his patience exhausted, the King adjured them to “speak or be hanged alive!” Thereupon, the chief of the band stepped forward and interpreted the dream as signifying that a child about to be born and named Faridun was

¹ In the Avesta, or Sacred Book of the Parsis, we can recognise Abtin (Avestan Āthwya) as founder of the noble Zoroastrian Athwyani clan. This throws an interesting sidelight on Firdausi’s account, and makes our heroine’s choice of so distinguished a husband the more appropriate. For the Avestan passages referring to Āthwya and his clan, compare Yasna 9. 7 and Yasht 13. 131.
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destined to bring him to ruin. Zahhak, filled with dread, determined to search the world for traces of the infant, and sent forth the chiefs of his army, charging them, in the event of their being successful, to destroy the entire family as well as the child.

Meanwhile, Abtin, the father of Faridun, becoming aware of Zahhak’s designs on his son and feeling his own life imperilled, fled from his home, only to fall into the hands of the enemy. He was seized, borne captive to the King and forthwith put to death. Faranak, heartbroken at her husband’s cruel fate and terror-stricken for the safety of the child Faridun, fled also from home, carrying the precious infant in her arms, and made her way towards the desert, where, in a distant pasture ground, she descried a beautiful cow—none other than the famous Birmaya, or Purmaya, according to the legend. Overcome, and weeping with fatigue both physical and mental, she besought the owner of the pasturage to nourish her babe with the milk of this wonderful cow.

“Ask what thou wilt,” she cried,
“E’en to my soul, ’tis thine!”

The good man, moved to compassion at her plight, soothed and comforted her, promising to care for the child as a father. Faridun remained under his faithful guardianship for three years.

Zahhak, however, never wearied of the search, and the beautiful Birmaya becoming more and more talked of, terror again clutched at the heart of Faranak that he might
FARANAK

discover the field where her infant lay hidden. She, therefore, sought the guardian of the child and confided to him her fears. With many regrets, his kind protector delivered up the boy, and Faranak fled with him to Mount Alburz,\(^1\) where dwelt a holy man, to whom she made piteous appeal “to take the child and father him with care”. The holy man took Faridun and reared him till he grew to be a brave and handsome youth.

In the meantime, the wicked Zahhak having learned the story of Birmaya and Faridun, sought out the noble cow, killed her and all the other cattle in the field, and then proceeded to the house of Faranak. Infuriated at finding it deserted, he burned the lofty palace to the ground.

When Faridun reached the age of sixteen years, he obtained permission from the holy man to come down from Mount Alburz to visit his mother. With tears of joy they met and embraced; but, when Faridun asked to be informed as to his birth, and Faranak related the tragic history from beginning to end, he became enraged and vowed he would wreak vengeance upon Zahhak. Vainly his mother implored him to abandon his rash schemes, dwelling on the power of

\(^1\) The great mountain range of Alburz in northern Persia (Avestan Harā Berezaiti) plays an important rôle throughout the history of Iran. Owing to the allusion to Hindustan, we probably must interpret the mention of Alburz as referring to the eastern end of this mighty range of the Caucasus. But the poet’s geography is not to be enquired into too closely. Tradition does connect Faridun indirectly with the region of Sistan through a side line of the royal dynasty. Compare Mohl, *Le Livre des Rois*, vol. 1, p. 59.
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the mighty monarch, against which it were the height of madness for a mere youth thus to pit himself:

Drunk with the wine of youth,
Men think themselves the only ones on earth
And vapour, but be thy days mirth and joy.
Do thou, my son, bear this advice in mind:
Give all words, save thy mother’s, to the wind.¹

It so happened that the people of Iran had been driven to desperation by the misrule and tyranny they had been forced to suffer at the hands of Zahhak; so that, when a certain man—a humble blacksmith, named Kawa, whose son had, amongst others, been seized, and was about to be slaughtered to satisfy a whim—turned upon him and openly defied him, they were only too eager to rise in rebellion. Placing themselves under Kawa’s leadership, they proceeded to seek out Faridun, who immediately prepared to join them. Before departing the youth turned to his mother and addressed her thus:

I must to battle, but do thou
Invoke the Lord, thy God,
Who, in joy and sorrow alike,
Is ever mindful of thy prayers.

Faranak blessed her noble son, and prayed for him with all her heart and soul. Faridun, as a valiant leader, succeeded in annihilating the iniquitous ruler Zahhak, thereby recovering the throne of Iran from the usurper’s hand and bringing peace and happiness once more to a sorely tried race.

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His mother, when informed of her son’s victory, fell on her knees and offered heartfelt thanks to the great god Ormazd, and, as a proof of her true and deep gratitude, spent the remainder of her life in the service of humanity, giving generously to the poor and performing many noble acts of mercy and self-sacrifice.

In this story of Faranak and Faridun the poet draws a beautiful picture of a mother’s devotion to her child. To quote the words of Firdausi, she is indeed “a glorious dame”.¹

¹ For the original Persian text consult Vullers, Firdusi, pp. 40–49.
CHAPTER III

SHahrINAZ & ARNAwAZ

Of the many evils perpetrated by Zahhak, the “Dragon King”, one of the most dastardly was his seizure of the two beautiful Princesses, Shahrinaz and Arnawaz, sisters of Jamshid, the great Persian monarch, whom he had overthrown and subsequently put to death. In the Avesta, or Sacred Book of the Parsis, we find them alluded to as captives of the monster Azhi Dahaka, or Zahhak. We are told in the Ardvi Sura Yasht that Faridun, before setting out to conquer Zahhak, invoked the aid of Ardvi Sura Anahita, the Goddess of Waters. The prayer, from the Avesta, is here quoted in translation:

Grant me this boon, O good,
Most beneficent Ardvi Sura Anahita!
That I may overcome Azhi Dahaka,
The triple-jawed, the three-headed, the six-eyed,
And that I may deliver his two wives, Savanghavach and Arenavach,
Who are the fairest of body amongst women,
And the most wonderful creatures in the world.¹

We are already acquainted with something of Zahhak’s history. The preceding chapter narrates briefly his dream, his consultation with the astrologers, and also Faridun’s determination to wreak vengeance upon him for having

¹ Yasht 5. 34. The first Western scholar to point out the identity of these two heroines, in the Šāhānāma and in the Avesta, was Darmesteter. See his essay on “Çavanhavāc et Erenavāc” in his Études Iranennes, vol. II, p. 215.