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978-1-107-60059-1 - A Year Amongst the Persians: Impressions as to the Life, Character, & Thought of the People of Persia Received during Twelve Months' Residence in that Country in the Years 1887-1888

Edward Granville Browne

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

“El-‘ilmu ‘ilmán: ‘ilmu’l-adyán, wa ‘ilmu’l-abdán.”
 “Science is twofold: Theology, and Medicine.”

I HAVE so often been asked how I first came to occupy myself with the study of Eastern languages that I have decided to devote the opening chapter of this book to answering this question, and to describing as succinctly as possible the process by which, not without difficulty and occasional discouragement, I succeeded, ere ever I set foot in Persia, in obtaining a sufficient mastery over the Persian tongue to enable me to employ it with some facility as an instrument of conversation, and to explore with pleasure and profit the enchanted realms of its vast and varied literature. I have not arrived at this decision without some hesitation and misgiving, for I do not wish to obtrude myself unnecessarily on the attention of my readers, and one can hardly be autobiographical without running the risk of being egotistical. But then the same thing applies with equal force to all descriptions intended for publication of any part of one’s personal experiences—such, for instance, as one’s own travels. Believing that the observations, impressions, and experiences of my twelve months’ sojourn in Persia during the years 1887–8 may be of interest to others besides myself, I have at length determined to publish them. It is too late now to turn squeamish about the use of the pronoun of the first person. I will be as sparing of its use as I can, but use it I must.

I might, indeed, have given to this book the form of a systematic treatise on Persia, a plan which for some time I did actually

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entertain; but against this plan three reasons finally decided me. *Firstly*, that my publishers expressed a preference for the narrative form, which, they believed, would render the book more readable. *Secondly*, that for the more ambitious project of writing a systematic treatise I did not feel myself prepared and could not prepare myself without the expenditure of time only to be obtained by the sacrifice of other work which seemed to me of greater importance. *Thirdly*, that the recent publication of the Hon. G. N. Curzon's encyclopædic work on Persia will for some time to come prevent any similar attempt on the part of anyone else who is not either remarkably rash or exceedingly well-informed. Moreover, the question "What first made you take up Persian?" when addressed to an Englishman who is neither engaged in, nor destined for, an Eastern career deserves an answer. In France, Germany, or Russia such a question would hardly be asked; but in England a knowledge of Eastern languages is no stepping-stone to diplomatic employment in Eastern countries; and though there exist in the Universities and the British Museum posts more desirable than this to the student of Oriental languages, such posts are few, and, when vacant, hotly competed for. In spite of every discouragement, there are, I rejoice to say, almost every year a few young Englishmen who, actuated solely by love of knowledge and desire to extend the frontiers of science in a domain which still contains vast tracts of unexplored country, devote themselves to this study. To them too often have I had to repeat the words of warning given to me by my honoured friend and teacher, the late Dr William Wright, an Arabic scholar whom not Cambridge or England only, but Europe, mourns with heart-felt sorrow and remembers with legitimate pride. It was in the year 1884, so far as I remember; I was leaving Cambridge with mingled feelings of sorrow and of hope: sorrow, because I was to bid farewell (for ever, as I then expected) to the University and the College to which I owe a debt of gratitude beyond the power of words to describe; hope,

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because the honours I had just gained in the Indian Languages Tripos made me sanguine of obtaining some employment which would enable me to pursue with advantage and success a study to which I was devotedly attached, and which even medicine (for which I was then destined), with all its charms and far-reaching interests, could not rival in my affections. This hope, in answer to an enquiry as to what I intended to do on leaving Cambridge, I one day confided to Dr Wright. No one, as I well knew, could better sympathise with it or gauge its chances of fulfilment, and from no one could I look for kinder, wiser, and more prudent counsel. And this was the advice he gave me—"If," said he, "you have private means which render you independent of a profession, then pursue your Oriental studies, and fear not that they will disappoint you, or fail to return you a rich reward of happiness and honour. But if you cannot afford to do this, and are obliged to consider how you may earn a livelihood, then devote yourself wholly to medicine, and abandon, save as a relaxation for your leisure moments, the pursuit of Oriental letters. The posts for which such knowledge will fit you are few, and, for the most part, poorly endowed, neither can you hope to obtain them till you have worked and waited for many years. And from the Government you must look for nothing, for it has long shown, and still continues to show, an increasing indisposition to offer the slightest encouragement to the study of Eastern languages."

A rare piece of good fortune has in my case falsified a prediction of which Dr Wright himself, though I knew it not till long afterwards, did all in his power to avert the accomplishment; but in general it still holds true, and I write these words, not for myself, but for those young English Orientalists whose disappointments, struggles, and unfulfilled, though legitimate, hopes I have so often been compelled to watch with keen but impotent sorrow and sympathy. Often I reflect with bitterness that England, though more directly interested in the East than

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any other European country save Russia, not only offers less encouragement to her sons to engage in the study of Oriental languages than any other great European nation, but can find no employment even for those few who, notwithstanding every discouragement, are impelled by their own inclination to this study, and who, by diligence, zeal, and natural aptitude, attain proficiency therein. How different is it in France! There, not to mention the more academic and purely scientific courses of lectures on Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, Zend, Pahlavi, Persian, Sanskrit, and on Egyptian, Assyrian, and Semitic archæology and philology, delivered regularly by savants of European reputation at the Collège de France and the Sorbonne (all of which lectures are freely open to persons of either sex and any nationality), there is a special school of Oriental languages (now within a year or two of its centenary) where practical instruction of the best imaginable kind is given (also gratuitously) by European professors, assisted in most cases by native *répétiteurs*, in literary and colloquial Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Malay, Javanese, Armenian, Modern Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Annamite, Hindustání, Tamil, Russian, and Roumanian, as well as in the geography, history, and jurisprudence of the states of the extreme East. To these lectures (the best, I repeat, without fear of contradiction, which can be imagined) any student, French or foreign, is admitted free of charge. And any student who has followed them diligently for three years, and passed the periodical examinations to the satisfaction of his teachers, provided that he be a French subject, may confidently reckon on receiving sooner or later from the Government such employment as his tastes, training, and attainments have fitted him for. The manifold advantages of this admirable system, alike to the State and the individual, must be obvious to the most obtuse, and need no demonstration. All honour to France for the signal services which she has rendered to the cause of learning! May she long maintain that position of eminence in science which she has so nobly won, and which she

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so deservedly occupies! And to us English, too, may she become, in this respect at least, an exemplar and a pattern!

Now, having unburdened my mind on this matter, I will recount briefly how I came to devote myself to the study of Oriental languages. I was originally destined to become an engineer; and therefore, partly because—at any rate sixteen years ago—the teaching of the “modern side” was still in a most rudimentary state, partly because I most eagerly desired emancipation from a life entirely uncongenial to me, I left school at the age of fifteen and a half, with little knowledge and less love of Latin and Greek. I have since then learned better to appreciate the value of these languages, and to regret the slenderness of my classical attainments. Yet the method according to which they are generally taught in English public schools is so unattractive, and, in my opinion, so inefficient, that had I been subjected to it much longer I should probably have come to loathe all foreign languages, and to shudder at the very sight of a grammar. It is a good thing for the student of a language to study its grammar when he has learned to read and understand it, just as it is a good thing for an artist to study the anatomy of the human body when he has learned to sketch a figure or catch the expression of a face; but for one to seek to obtain mastery over a language by learning rules of accidence and syntax is as though he should regard the dissecting-room as the single and sufficient portal of entrance to the Academy. How little a knowledge of grammar has to do with facility in the use of language is shown by the fact that comparatively few have studied the grammar of that language over which they have the greatest mastery, while amongst all the Latin and Greek scholars in this country those who could make an extempore speech, dash off an impromptu note, or carry on a sustained conversation in either language, are in a small minority.

Then, amongst other evil things connected with it, is the magnificent contempt for all non-English systems of pronuncia-

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tion which the ordinary public-school system of teaching Latin and Greek encourages. Granted that the pronunciation of Greek is very different in the Athens of to-day from what it was in the time of Plato or Euripides, and that Cicero would not understand, or would understand with difficulty, the Latin of the Vatican, does it follow that both languages should be pronounced exactly like English, of all spoken tongues the most anomalous in pronunciation? What should we think of a Chinaman who, because he was convinced that the pronunciation of English in the fourteenth century differed widely from that of the nineteenth, deliberately elected to read Chaucer with the accent and intonation of Chinese? If Latin and Greek alone were concerned it would not so much matter, but the influence of this doctrine of pan-Anglican pronunciation too often extends to French and German as well. The spirit engendered by it is finely displayed in these two sayings which I remember to have heard repeated—“Anyone can understand English if they choose, provided you talk loud enough.” “Always mistrust an Englishman who talks French like a Frenchman.”

Apart from the general failure to invest the books read with any human, historical, or literary interest, or to treat them as expressions of the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of our fellow-creatures instead of as grammatical tread-mills, there is another reason why the public-school system of teaching languages commonly fails to impart much useful knowledge of them. When *any intelligent being who is a free agent wishes to obtain an efficient knowledge of a foreign language as quickly as possible, how does he proceed?* He begins with an easy text, and first obtains the general sense of each sentence and the meaning of each particular word from his teacher. In default of a teacher, he falls back on the best available substitute, namely, a good translation and a dictionary. Looking out words in a dictionary is, however, mere waste of time, if their meaning can be ascertained in any other way; so that he will use this means only when

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compelled to do so. Having ascertained the meaning of each word, he will note it down either in the margin of the book or elsewhere, so that he may not have to ask it or look it out again. Then he will read the passage which he has thus studied over and over again, if possible aloud, so that tongue, ear, and mind may be simultaneously familiarised with the new instrument of thought and communication of which he desires to possess himself, until he perfectly understands the meaning without mentally translating it into English, and until the foreign words, no longer strange, evoke in his mind, not their English equivalents, but the ideas which they connote. This is the proper way to learn a language, and it is opposed at almost every point to the public-school method, which regards the use of “cribs” as a deadly sin, and substitutes parsing and construing for reading and understanding.

Notwithstanding all this, I am well aware that the advocates of this method have in their armoury another and a more potent argument. “A boy does not go to school,” they say, “to learn Latin and Greek, but to learn to confront disagreeable duties with equanimity, and to do what is distasteful to him with cheerfulness.” To this I have nothing to say; it is unanswerable and final. If boys are sent to school to learn what the word disagreeable means, and to realise that the most tedious monotony is perfectly compatible with the most acute misery, and that the most assiduous labour, if it be not wisely directed, does not necessarily secure the attainment of the object ostensibly aimed at, then, indeed, does the public school offer the surest means of attaining this end. The most wretched day of my life, except the day when I left college, was the day I went to school. During the earlier portion of my school life I believe that I nearly fathomed the possibilities of human misery and despair. I learned then (what I am thankful to say I have unlearned since) to be a pessimist, a misanthrope, and a cynic; and I have learned since, what I did not understand then, that to know by rote a

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quantity of grammatical rules is in itself not much more useful than to know how often each letter of the alphabet occurs in *Paradise Lost*, or how many separate stones went to the building of the Great Pyramid¹.

It was the Turkish war with Russia in 1877–8 that first attracted my attention to the East, about which, till that time, I had known and cared nothing. To the young, war is always interesting, and I watched the progress of this struggle with eager attention. At first my proclivities were by no means for the Turks; but the losing side, more especially when it continues to struggle gallantly against defeat, always has a claim on our sympathy, and moreover the cant of the anti-Turkish party in England, and the wretched attempts to confound questions of abstract justice with party politics, disgusted me beyond measure. Ere the close of the war I would have died to save Turkey, and I mourned the fall of Plevna as though it had been a disaster inflicted on my own country. And so gradually pity turned to admiration, and admiration to enthusiasm, until the Turks became in my eyes veritable heroes, and the desire to identify myself with their cause, make my dwelling amongst them, and unite with them in the defence of their land, possessed me heart and soul. At the age of sixteen such enthusiasm more easily establishes itself in the heart, and, while it lasts (for it often fades as quickly as it bloomed), exercises a more absolute and uncontrolled sway over the mind than at a more advanced age. Even though it be transitory, its effects (as in my case) may be permanent.

So now my whole ambition came to be this: how I might become in time an officer in the Turkish army. And the plan

¹ Many of my readers, even of those who may be inclined to agree with me as to the desirability of modifying the teaching of our public schools, will blame me for expressing myself so strongly. The value of a public-school education in the development of *character* cannot be denied, and in the teaching also great improvements have, I believe, been made within the last ten or fifteen years. But as far as my own experience goes, I do not feel that I have spoken at all too strongly.

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which I proposed to myself was to enter first the English army, to remain there till I had learned my profession and attained the rank of captain, then to resign my commission and enter the service of the Ottoman Government, which, as I understood, gave a promotion of two grades. So wild a project will doubtless move many of my readers to mirth, and some to indignation, but, such as it was, it was for a time paramount in my mind, and its influence outlived it. Its accomplishment, however, evidently needed time; and, as my enthusiasm demanded some immediate object, I resolved at once to begin the study of the Turkish language.

Few of my readers, probably, have had occasion to embark on this study, or even to consider what steps they would take if a desire to do so suddenly came upon them. I may therefore here remark that for one not resident in the metropolis it is far from easy to discover anything about the Turkish language, and almost impossible to find a teacher. However, after much seeking and many enquiries, I succeeded in obtaining a copy of Barker's *Turkish Grammar*. Into this I plunged with enthusiasm. I learned Turkish verbs in the old school fashion, and blundered through the "Pleasantries of Khoja Naşru'd-Din Efendi"; but so ignorant was I, and so involved is the Ottoman construction, that it took me some time to discover that the language is written from right to left; while, true to the pan-Anglican system on which I have already animadverted, I read my Turkish as though it had been English, pronouncing, for example, the article *bir* and the substantive *ber* exactly the same, and as though both, instead of neither, rhymed with the English words *fir* and *fur*. And so I bungled on for a while, making slow but steady progress, and wasting much time, but with undiminished enthusiasm; for which I was presently rewarded by discovering a teacher. This was an Irish clergyman, who had, I believe, served as a private in the Crimean War, picked up some Turkish, attracted attention by his proficiency in a language of which very few Englishmen

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have any knowledge, and so gained employment as an interpreter. After the war he was ordained a clergyman of the Church of England, and remained for some years at Constantinople as a missionary. I do not know how his work prospered; but if he succeeded in winning from the Turks half the sympathy and love with which they inspired him, his success must have been great indeed. When I discovered him, he had a cure of souls in the Consett iron district, having been driven from his last parish by the resentment of his flock (Whigs, almost to a man), which he had incurred by venturing publicly to defend the Turks at a time when they were at the very nadir of unpopularity, and when the outcry about the "Bulgarian atrocities" was at its height. So the very religious and humane persons who composed his congregation announced to his vicar their intention of withdrawing their subscriptions and support from the church so long as the "Bashi-bozouk" (such, as he informed me, not without a certain pride, was the name they had given him) occupied its pulpit. So there was nothing for it but that he should go. Isolated in the uncongenial environment to which he was transferred, he was, I think, almost as eager to teach me Turkish as I was to learn it, and many a pleasant hour did I pass in his little parlour listening with inexhaustible delight to the anecdotes of his life in Constantinople which he loved to tell. Peace be to his memory! He died in Africa, once more engaged in mission work, not long after I went to Cambridge.

One of the incidental charms of Orientalism is the kindness and sympathy often shown by scholars of the greatest distinction and the highest attainments to the young beginner, even when he has no introduction save the pass-word of a common and much-loved pursuit. Of this I can recall many instances, but it is sufficient to mention the first in my experience. Expecting to be in, or within reach of, London for a time, I was anxious to improve the occasion by prosecuting my Turkish studies (for the "Bashi-bozouk" had recently left Consett for Hull), and to this end