

THE NEW PERSIAN WOMAN

Western nations are not alone in the rapid change of today; the unchangeableness and despotism of the East are yielding as never before. The greatest factor in this, is Western contact. The fruits of Christianity are welcomed all over the Orient, for non-Christian and anti-Christian faiths never work for the progress of a country, for the uplift of individuals, nor for the relief of suffering woman, except as a mother is a negligible quantity.

For centuries the position of the Eastern woman has been a crying evil; it has seldom, however, been recognized as such by her, but simply accepted as her lot. Man has legislated to his own advantage, and woman has acquiesced, no other way being open or known to her. Today contact has changed this.

Few countries are more familiar than the land of the Shah, yet how little is generally known of its present condition? The fame of its cats and carpets, its poets and philosophers, its wine and its rose gardens is widespread; but of the fame of its men and women little is heard. Persia still lives on the credit of its past glory, yet nationality is indestructible, and the germ of the power which made such a bold bid for world conquest, though it has lain dormant for the greater part of the last 2,250 years, is still vital, and with the help and guidance of the West, Persia may yet take an honourable place among the nations of the Middle East. Isolation and sleep have gone, and huge changes are bound to come.

The greatest weakness in the social and national life of Persia has been its estimate of woman. The seclusion and swaddling of her life has been a religious command and a political policy; this wastage of "a nation's greatest asset" has kept Persia in a backwater. Emancipation will not come through protest or pleading. Persia's

women must show themselves worthy of confidence, to which end they must have education of which Western women must show the value, and to the Oriental mind education and moral training are acknowledged as the fruit of Christianity.

One sign of the awakening of Persia, is that men are willing that girls as well as boys should be educated. Surely this points to an acknowledgment of the handicap put upon women which has kept the race back at its source. While there must be a changed and enlightened manhood willing that this handicap should be removed, there must be a corresponding desire on the part of the women, also the weakening or collapse of the system of which this handicap is a product. To an unexpected degree this willingness and desire coexist; how is the third obstacle to be overcome?

What is the present-day position of women in Persia? Owing to the lack of education, child marriage, polygamy, (temporal and eternal) temporary marriage, concubinage, easy divorce on the part of the husband, and a low estimate of her powers and trustworthiness, it is one of disaster. How can men become patriots and leaders whose mothers are subjected to such indignities? Mohammedan men appropriate every privilege to themselves, and do all in their power to debase and humiliate womanhood. Hence, the women are downtrodden but defiant and imperious, with little idea of self-control. The attempt to improve upon nature, and to banish woman from her rightful place in the world, has resulted in a mutilated, unbalanced social order, which militates against home life and national development. There is no word in the language for home, and on the very rare occasions when men and women are seen together in the streets, the woman always walks behind! There can be little progress in freedom, philanthropy, or morals, for there is no domestic soil in which the seeds can germinate. The Koran sanctions four contemporary wives, who may be cast adrift at any time without explanation or notice.

While the husband possesses unlimited power of divorce—absolute, immediate, unquestioned—no corresponding privilege belongs to the wife. When divorced she may claim her dowry, literally her “hire” but very often she hangs on, neglected and superseded, sometimes confined and beaten, if such be her lord’s will. Even if a man does not exercise his rights, yet the knowledge of their existence tends to debase womanhood and to weaken its influence.

The condition of the servile concubine, also sanctioned by the Koran, is even worse. She is at the entire mercy of her master, who sells her when he tires of her, and she passes from master to master a very wreck of womanhood. If children are borne by these women they are legitimate and share in the inheritance, so forming additional ground for domestic feuds, and lessening the tone and vigour of the ruling classes. Temporary marriages for a few weeks or “for ninety-nine years” are resorted to, and widows may remarry.

It is only necessary to know a few Persian women intimately to see how these principles work out, or to realize how hard their lot is. Many appear light-hearted and indifferent to their disabilities; others say “it is *Kismet*” that is, “the portion that is granted.” Some consult fortune tellers and use various talismans to win back favour, or to cause evil to enemies.

The veil is looked upon by many as a privilege. They say that until the men have cleaner minds it is a necessity for every self-respecting woman. Recently the upper class women have replaced the long white cambric veil with a short black horsehair one, which is more comfortable but scarcely more becoming.

Child marriage exists, not as sanctioned by the Koran, but as practiced by the Prophet. This example, the dearth of education and occupations for girls, and the brutal selfishness of the men, bring untold suffering and sap the country’s strength at its source. How much of girlhood’s inheritance of joy and laughter, of books and

play, of friends and of freedom is denied to the girl wife!

And what of Persian childhood with its threefold burden of superstition, fatalism, and ignorance, with its medical, educational, moral and spiritual problems? The limit of childhood is only fixed by physical laws, the immaturity of the mind is ignored. The seclusion of girls has its moral and mental effects as well as physical. The sufferings resulting from the conditions under which the little carpet weavers of Kerman work are deplorable. A heavy toll of suffering and early death awaits the children of opium smoking parents. A physician from Persia writes: "There are more childhood diseases here than in any place of which I know. It is estimated that the mortality is 85%." From their earliest years boys and girls see and hear what a child should never know. They grow up in an atmosphere where thought, word and deed are all impure—lying, false promises and threats are all allowed as right, in dealing with children. How much, too, is left out of their lives? Islam is not for the child. Their prophet could never have called the children to him. Yet how quickly they learn to know and love the Children's Friend, who still says, "Suffer the children to come unto Me."

Half of the population of Persia lives in its 40,000 villages. Here the women are of more account than in the towns; they lead busy lives, spinning and weaving wool and cotton, cleaning and grinding rice and corn, and making butter and cheese. They are simple and friendly folk and always very interested and curious when an English woman appears. They are slow to take in new ideas, and are surprised when suggestions are made about child training and home making. An attentive hearing is always given to the Gospel.

Another fourth of the population are Ilyats or wandering tribespeople, who live a free life, moving their quarters in spring and autumn. These tribes, of which there are many, are of Arab, Turkish, and Persian origin. With many of them robbing is a profession. They are

very lax Mohammedans. Islam teaches that women should not work for the upkeep of the house, but these women do much of the work of the tribe, and so earn a good position. They all ride, and some are excellent shots. They are said to be moral; in some tribes immoral women are shot. Polygamy is the custom. The chiefs of some of the more important tribes have come in contact with Europeans, and are asking for doctors and teachers for whom they are able and willing to pay.

The progressive element, as elsewhere, is in the towns, and it is among the townswomen, those who suffer most, that there is real movement. In cities which have contact with the West, such as Teheran and Isfahan, this is most evident. Men and boys come to Europe for business or education; Europeans, and among them a number of American and English women, live and work in these and other cities. The literate throughout the country number three per cent of the men, and three per cent of the women, chiefly town dwellers.

For some years educated women in Teheran have realized the backwardness of their country, and seen how much the place of its women was answerable for this condition. Considering their lack of knowledge and experience they have made real progress.

During the revolution of 1910-11 they exerted a powerful moral influence on the movement. Three hundred women came to the *Majlis* (Parliament), some of whom were admitted. They tore aside their veils and said they would kill their husbands, their sons, and themselves if the liberty and dignity of the Persian nation were not upheld. Behind the curtains in the mosques they read exhortations to their sisters to stand firm to the dream of Persian independence. The men asked for and read these documents, and it was said in the *Majlis*, "The women teach us how to love our country." They gave money and jewels, saying, "We are women and cannot fight, but we can give to our country."

After finding their voice and power in this way, dozens of women's political societies controlled by a central organization came into existence, also an inquiry bureau and a woman's newspaper called *Blossom*.

The old type of girls' schools is now considered worse than useless, many government schools for girls have been opened; the Bahais also have girls' schools. English and American missionary societies have about twenty schools, some of them most excellent, for Parsis, Jews, Armenians, and Persians. It is to these we look for the development of public opinion and strong moral character and Christian teaching, but they need to be multiplied a hundred times.

The tragedy of child marriage can best be averted by education. A boy who was at an English school in Isfahan asked his headmaster to see his father and to persuade him not to give his little daughter of seven to be married. How did that boy come to see the evil? A visitor to the American school in Teheran said, "I wish my wife had been educated," adding, "I want my daughter to take her diploma, and then give her life to educational work among the women of Persia." Two upper class girls are hoping to come to England this year to take up educational and medical training, with a view to helping their countrywomen.

Early in 1917 a branch of the Mothers' Union was commenced among Persian Christian women in Isfahan. A friendly educated woman was asked to speak at some of their meetings and asked if something of the same kind could be arranged for upper class Moslem women. There were considerable difficulties in the way, but at the first meeting about forty were present, including the Deputy Governor's wife, and other leading Persian women, also several English women. Three of the latter spoke, and suggested united work for the uplift of Persia. The position of Persian women was contrasted with that of those in the West; stress was laid on what the power and influence of women might and ought to be in their

homes, and in their country, on the importance of knowledge and education, and the need of schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Copies of a suggested syllabus were distributed. There was some free and friendly discussion, and it was decided that further meetings should be held. Three more took place that spring, both English and Persian women taking part. The importance of a woman's character, founded on Prov. 31:10-31, and the moral, physical and spiritual training of children, all proved most interesting, and gave rise to a request for open and frequent meetings, not only for their own class, but for poorer women also. If this had been possible much might have been done, but the hot weather and then a famine and no people with time to spare for fresh work, made it difficult. Apart from these reasons a break was politic, as the Mullahs were suspicious and might have given trouble, for though no religious teaching was given it was fully recognized that the principles advocated were the outcome of Christianity, also the teaching of Islam is opposed to progress, and this movement meant progress.

However, things are soon forgotten, and in the spring of 1918 it was quite easy to get the ladies together again. Education was the leading topic, both English and Persian viewpoints were given. An able paper was read by the headmistress of a Persian government school, also a poem, which was a cry for liberty, was written for and recited at one meeting.

In 1919, a stirring address was given by Dr. Emmeline Stuart on the evils of child-marriage. A Persian lady who feels acutely the sufferings of her fellow countrywomen drew up a promise form, which a number of those present signed, promising not to give their daughters in marriage until they were eighteen; some only agreed to the age being sixteen, and not to allow their sons to marry little girls, nor to attend the weddings of child brides. A small beginning, in truth, but it *must* develop. An account of the meeting was sent to one of the leading Mullahs in the city, a better man than most of his profession; he was

much impressed by it, and said that he would call together some of the younger Mullahs and discuss it with them, saying, "a doctor has spoken and we must give heed."

It was pathetic to hear some of these high-class women saying, "We have not the education and knowledge that you have, how can we work for the good of our country? We are not free to do anything; we may promise, and then our husbands will not allow us to perform." One was most anxious to start a society to be called the "Anglo-Persian Sisters' Union." Another, the lady who first suggested this venture, now edits a fortnightly newspaper called *The Tongue of the Woman*. In a letter recently received, it is said that this paper "flourishes exceedingly," and that its editor had just been giving "a very keen and enthusiastic talk" at the Mothers' Union "on more and better education for girls." How are they going to get what they need and want?

In Shiraz an effort has lately been made by the progressive party there, to open a girls' school. The Prince Governor, a clever and enlightened man, is in favour of it, but there is strong opposition from the Mullahs, who say that Islam does not allow the education of girls. This statement is a severe blow to the future of Islam in Shiraz. People are demanding education for their girls; if Islam forbids it they will seriously consider forsaking Islam. The probability is, that they will be attracted to the religion which satisfies the need they are beginning to feel. A young convert to the new cult of Bahaism recently gave among his reasons for the change, that Islam hindered all progress, and would not tolerate modern education for all classes and for both sexes, and that if it did, it would need to be changed radically. He also referred to the low position which it gives to women, whereas Bahaism advocates the equality of the sexes, and the need of using every means by which progress may be made. It prohibits polygamy and divorce, directs women to discard the veil and share as equals in the intercourse of social life. The future of Christian women in Persia is one of great possi-

bilities. From the Bible, which many read for themselves, from teaching and example, numbers are learning to follow in the footsteps of the Master. Christian homes are multiplying. Numbers of women and girls are at work in the mission hospitals, and schools, as Bible-women, nurses, ward maids, and teachers, where by lip and life, they commend our most holy faith. Some are ready to teach in the villages, others use the press. Though Islam still threatens death to those who leave her ranks, many run the risk. In practice there is far more liberty at the present time than the most sanguine would have dared to hope for, twenty years ago. If Persia is again to count as a nation she must have leaders from among her own people, both men and women. Justice must be assured to both sexes and all classes. The untouched resources of the country must be developed—she must have good roads and railways, good water supply, postal service, hospitals and orphanages, and industrial and social advance. But all these things are impossible without education, and unless that is a Christian education, the country will be better without it. Education opens many doors which are far better left closed, unless those entering them know something of the Spirit of Christ.

The Spirit of God is working wonderfully among the nations, yet it is left to us to hasten or hinder His work. Man's work is limited only by time and strength and capacity, so vast are today's God-given opportunities.

What is to be the future of Persia? This can only be answered when the development of its womanhood is foreseen. This is bound up with the educational facilities opened to them and depends upon the religious foundation of the education. What is it to be? Islam does not believe in education, and so is out of the running. Is it to be Bahaism or Christianity? Much depends on the response of the women of the West. What shall it be?

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