THE NEW WOMAN IN PERSIA*

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IN nineteen hundred and five the Persian lay asleep by the wayside. It was no afternoon nap he was taking but the heavy sleep of centuries of stupid indifference. A closely woven mantle of traditions and customs was thrown over his head to keep out the light. It kept out the air too, but he only slept more soundly, all unconscious of the dogs fighting around his head or the donkeys and mules that nearly walked over his feet.

One day something happened. The Idea of constitutional government came that way, saw the sleeping Persian, seized him, shook him, stood him on his feet, faced him toward the light, and sped away. The Persian rubbed his eyes, dazed by the brightness, stretched himself and said, "Ya Allah." But he did not lie down again, the Idea had given him a too thorough shaking. Instead, he walked to the public square and made a speech. He did not know the meaning of all he said, but the words which most often came to his lips were, Constitution, Freedom, Progress, Education. When he went home he found the Idea had come into the *andarun* and the women were talking of the same great subjects, though they comprehended even less of what it all meant. From that day to this the Persian has never been the same. He does not like to lie by the wayside; he cannot for the life of him get sound asleep, and when he dozes off he dreams. It is not the purpose of this article to give the history of the constitutional movement in Persia during the last seven years, but only to state that the recent changes which have come to the women of Persia can be traced to this movement, which has had an awakening, stimulating effect on men and women alike. Parliament's doors are closed now, but were they never to be opened again, what the Idea has already accomplished in arousing the people to a new life is of great and permanent value.

* Although the New Woman is found in varying numbers in all the large cities of Persia, the writer of this article wishes to state that her observations are confined to Teheran.

When the New Woman in Persia awoke, being still a woman, she straightway thought of her appearance and made some significant changes in dress. Seen on the street, she is still enveloped from head to foot in the long, black sheet or *chuddur*, but in place of the troublesome face veil of white cloth she wears a small square of black net or woven horse-hair which conceals her features perfectly and is far more comfortable. A glance at her feet shows that she no longer scuffles along in heel-less slippers; she wears well-made shoes with as high uppers as she pleases. A few years ago women who wore shoes coming above their ankles were jeered at and threatened in the streets. The full-length European skirt is rapidly displacing the very abbreviated plaited skirt and narrow black trousers, so long the ugly, ungainly house-dress. And since the long skirt is worn, the very full street bloomers are not considered necessary. Many women who have not yet adopted skirts wear a house-veil draped around them like a skirt and caught over the left arm, a graceful and pleasing costume. It is to be regretted that many girls are abandoning the dainty white headkerchief, so picturesque and universally becoming. But without this kerchief it is necessary to dress the hair more neatly, and for this reason many girls are wearing their hair in one braid instead of in nine or eleven tiny braids. Hair worn in one braid can be combed every day, whereas once or twice a month was considered sufficient for the old style. European fashions in dress are much sought after, and the results are sometimes painful—cotton lace on woollen dresses, and all the colours of the rainbow displayed on one gown. At first there was much talk of abandoning the veil entirely, and this is still a cherished dream of Persian women, but they have come to realize that it is not time yet for this radical step,—that, at present, to go with uncovered faces would but put them at the mercy of evil-minded men. Six or seven months ago a very progressive young woman designed an outfit to take the place of the *chuddur*, leaving the face heavily veiled. She appeared in this several times on the street, but attracted so much attention, and was annoyed by so many remarks, that she was obliged to put it away for

some future day. She told me, with considerable appreciation of the situation, that some of the people in her neighbourhood thought she was the ex-Shah in disguise !

In her home the New Woman receives you as graciously as ever, prepares less elaborate refreshments than formerly, does not force you to eat as much as in old days, and offers cigarettes instead of the water-pipe. Her guests are seated on chairs instead of the floor, and drink their tea from cups as tea-glasses have gone out of style. The numerous and tiresome company of women servants is conspicuous by its absence, and the daughters of the house are not ashamed to pass the tea and sweets with their own hands. The hostess does not say quite as often as she did a few years ago, " O *khanum*, we Persian women are nothing but savages " ; yet she still speaks with sadness of her own childhood, " There were no schools for girls in our day ; we had no opportunity." Or she tells how she was married at the age of ten or twelve, and how good it is that times have changed. The fact that her own daughter of fourteen or fifteen is still at school gives the mother a feeling of self-respect. If a girl is sixteen and unmarried, the mother is a little nervous about it, for their old-fashioned neighbours will talk ; or, perhaps, no one will want to marry a girl so old, and not to marry at all would be monstrous misfortune. The mother speaks of her daughters with as much pride as of her sons, and is keenly interested in their progress. A few weeks ago I was congratulating a young mother on her first-born, and added, " I suppose you are sorry the baby is not a boy." To my amazement she replied, " What better service could I render my fatherland than to bring up girls, for until there are good mothers the country will make no progress." A few years ago this girl was in school, and with her best friend one day remarked, " Every time we hear of the death of an old man we are downright happy, for it means the removal of one more obstacle from the path of woman's progress. We can grow up with new ideas but the old folks cannot change."

It is in education that the New Woman has come most conspicuously to the foreground. Ten years ago the

American Mission School had half-a-dozen Moslem girls among its Armenian pupils, and there was not a native school for Persian girls in Teheran. This year the American School has enrolled more than one hundred and sixty Persian girls alone, and there are said to be seventy girls' schools in the city, with a total enrolment of five thousand. Scarcely half-a-dozen of these schools are doing good, efficient work, but what could be expected when almost none of the women in charge has ever been to school herself and they have only the most vague idea of what real education is! It is to be wondered at that the schools are accomplishing as much as they are, and the Persian women who have undertaken this great task in the face of difficulties so momentous are worthy of our deepest admiration and sympathy. Two years ago the girls' schools were very much talked about, the worst possible stories were circulated in regard to them and it required some courage on the part of the girls to attend at all. But the opposition has died down because it was useless, the girls could not be kept at home. "You may kill us if you want to," said two sisters to men who threatened them in the street, "but we are not going to stay away from school." Significant features of the change in public sentiment are the interest and pride of fathers and brothers in the progress of the girls and the growing demand for educated wives.

A few years ago arithmetic and geography were considered very advanced studies, not in the range of common education. Now they are taught in all the schools. New text-books are coming out all the time—history, physiology, ethics, nature books—most of these being arranged in the form of questions and answers. A foreign language, French or English, has always been greatly in demand. Now there is a sort of nationalistic reaction, and while foreign languages are popular, more attention is being given to Persian. The Koran is less read than formerly, text-books for the study of Arabic take its place to a large degree. As there is no public school system, the girls' schools are all managed by private individuals. No school can be opened without a permit or license from the Department of Education,

and there is a woman supervisor who visits them all and makes her report to the Minister of Education. As might be expected in an educational movement of such mushroom growth, the emphasis is laid entirely on information—what is put into the mind is the all-important thing, and “the more the better.” The real meaning of education, the leading out and development of all one’s powers, is unknown to the Persians. One’s heart goes out to these women and girls, reaching so eagerly for higher things, so hungry for all that has been denied to Persian womanhood for centuries. These big girls who have come late to school and who work so hard “because their time is short,” are the “sacrifice” for those who come after; they have but a glimpse into the golden possibilities of life, and then regretfully, rebelliously, turn away to a life hindered by many of the restrictions their mothers have known. But for their daughters, for the next generation, there is hope of a better day.

A few schools accept married girls as pupils, and it is a common thing to hear older women express the wish that they might attend. Some of these women find satisfaction in belonging to societies or women’s clubs. There are various organizations of this order, concerned with the progress and prosperity of the nation. They hold meetings and make speeches and plan great things. Last year they talked of a free hospital; this year they are giving theatrical performances in some of the large gardens, on behalf of a free school.

For several years some of the most patriotic women have been trying to patronize home industries by using native products as far as possible in preference to importations, often superior to Persian goods. Last December, when the Russian ultimatum was before the government, women took a surprising part in the demonstrations. The young woman, who designed and tried to introduce a substitute for the *chuddur* and who stands in the front ranks of the liberal, enterprising women of the city, says, “Persian women have filled the page of history by their brave actions during the time of the Russian ultimatum. About a hundred women took a Persian flag and went into Parliament, saying to the men,

‘ If you are not going to fight with Russia, we women go to be killed that we may not see our homes ruined.’ And the following days they went from tea-shop to tea-shop and broke the cups and the tea-pots. They smashed the windows of shops selling Russian goods, and compelled men to take off their Russian goloshes and to remove Russian collars in the streets. For three weeks they stopped all the tramcars. Many of them are still boycotting Russian goods.” In those days of excitement women attended the mosques in great numbers, and in the sections reserved for women read addresses exhorting to patriotism and to loyalty to Persian independence. The men, listening from a distance, would send someone to borrow the addresses and read them in loud tones for the benefit of the men present !

To one familiar with the usual condition of Moslem women, the changes outlined above are of deepest significance. Moslem women are waking to the fact that there is something better for them than they have heretofore known. They stand on the threshold of a new life, and out of the dreary emptiness of the past they cry out passionately for all that the women of Christian lands have had so long. They want our dress, our education, our freedom, our happiness. And our religion ? Not consciously do they want Christianity, but their need of Christ is a cry for Him. They are beginning to think for themselves and to question. Their belief in Islam is being shaken ; some are becoming Bahais, more are “ *be-din* ” (without religion), a few are walking bravely in the Light. Among some of the more patriotic there is evident a pathetic attempt to patch up Islam, to make its contrast with Christianity less painful. Persian women are bright, lovable, responsive to friendship. They have adopted our dress, they will get our education in a measure, perhaps our freedom to a certain extent. Shall they have our Christ ?

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