

IS AFGHANISTAN CLOSED?

The present-day struggle throughout all Moslem countries to reconcile the system of Mohammed with the march of civilization is a hard one, and deserving of the generous sympathy of Christendom. Having had opportunity recently of studying the problem firsthand in the hitherto closed land of Afghanistan, I was deeply moved by the experience. The struggle is particularly severe in that country, where conservative orthodox Islam has been suddenly whirled headlong and unprepared into the vortex of modern problems.

From the expression "hitherto closed" it must not be inferred that the land is now open as other civilized countries are to the traveller or foreign resident. In spite of her new government, and recently established diplomatic relations with half the countries of Europe, in spite of the efforts and representations of the young Afghan party, in spite of recent advances on many lines, Afghanistan remains today practically inaccessible to Europeans and Americans, save to those who belong to the Foreign Legations, or are employed by the Amir in his schemes for promoting the wellbeing and development of the country.

Denmark has no representative in Afghanistan, so it is very difficult for a Danish visitor there; the more so as there are no regulations of any kind for the protection of foreigners in Kabul and no hotels where one can stay with the least pretence of comfort, unless one has brought one's own servants. The Afghan Government therefore wisely dissuades foreigners from visiting Kabul unless they have friends at one or the other of the embassies.

My arrival in Kabul was not a particularly pleasant one. The Afghan Agency in India had omitted to furnish me with the necessary papers for clearing my baggage, and I was consequently an object of suspicion, and told that as it was evening, and the head official had left, I must spend the night in the courtyard of the Custom House. Against this I protested so vigorously, that I at last obtained permission to go to "The Hotel", and two men were detailed to take me there. The Kabul bazaar is never a safe place for a European at night, and I must confess to some uneasiness as my two guards walked me round and about the bazaars without apparently being able to locate the Hotel. They eventually deposited me at a private house where two young Italian engineers were living, through whose kind services I then obtained permission to drive to the French Embassy, where I found the official to whom I had an introduction. He and his wife kindly put me up for the night, and helped me the next day to find the hotel and to settle up with the Custom House officials. "The Hotel" was merely a native inn for Europeans, the fact that it was for Europeans being indicated by the sign of "a knife and fork and tea pot" painted over the main entrance. The hotel residents consisted of some dozen men, French doctors, Italian engineers, and German professional men, all in the employment of the Amir. For my accommodation, I secured a little outbuilding on one of the flat roofs, the only room in the hotel which could boast of windows. Some days later I called at the Foreign Office, and subsequently received an invitation from the Minister and his wife to stay with them for the remainder of my time in Kabul; the Vizier surmising—and not without reason—that the hotel was not a fit place for a European lady. Moreover I was the first Dane to set foot on Afghan soil, and he desired to honour me accordingly.

In the luxurious household of Mohammed Tarzi Khan, I had the best possible opportunity of studying home life in Afghanistan, and the struggle going on in the harem

to bring life there into harmony with more modern ideas. The question of the emancipation of woman is one which now figures largely in Afghan life; and the problem is the same whether it concerns the poor peasant woman or her richer and more refined sister. The one is the slave of her husband, the other his toy. The poor woman becomes worn out with work; the rich one fades away in her golden cage. The young Afghans know well enough that there is no hope for their country really prospering, or attaining to a place amongst the civilized nations of the world, unless the harem can be transformed into a real home—a place where the children can be properly brought up and subjected to such discipline as makes for the formation of character and success. They also realize what a tremendous loss it is to a nation to be deprived of women's work and influence; and that the girls need to be educated to take an interest in something more than gossip and finery. But how to remedy the evils of the harem, and at the same time remain faithful to Islamic ideas is the problem.

The Koran enjoins both veil and harem; and veil and harem render it impossible to send their girlhood to school; while polygamy is a source of domestic misery. This is fully understood by the young Amir, who has himself taken but one wife, and all who aspire to his favour do likewise. He even introduced a measure enforcing monogamy, but was compelled by the conservative party to withdraw it as contrary to the teaching of the Koran. The same fate befell the school for girls, which was started by the Amir, and was at first received with enthusiasm. The Queen and her mother (who by the way was my charming hostess) were the patronesses, and things looked promising enough until Parliament assembled, when the *Muftis* and *Qadhis* pronounced it to be an innovation contrary to the Koran and Traditions. The school was consequently closed, to the great regret of the Young Afghan party, but none dared openly to criticize the wisdom of the greybeards.

"For never did chief more sorely need Heaven for his aid and stay
Than the man who would reign in this country, and tame Afghans for
a day.

I look from a half ruined fort on Kabul spreading below,
On the near hills crowned with cannon, and the far hills piled with
snow.

Fair are the hills, well watered, and the vines on the upland swell,
You might think you were reigning in Heaven; I know I am ruling in
Hell."

What makes Afghanistan a hell to rule? In the first place, the disagreeable peculiarities of the Afghan character, and secondly, the disagreeable peculiarities of the *Sharia'*, or ecclesiastical law, by which every orthodox Moslem state must be governed. The Afghan is cruel, fanatical and very proud. There is no subject so much on his tongue or about which he is so sensitive as his honour; but his notions of honour are often extremely childish. He will quarrel and fight like a small school-boy to demonstrate his physical strength, and seek to take bloody vengeance on any one who may seem to doubt his valour.

The maintenance of the honour of the harem is another Afghan specialty. There is a saying that the causes of all their quarrels are three *Zs*: *zan*, *zar*, *zamin*, i. e. women, money, and land. The kidnapping of a woman is very often the origin of the vendettas which are the curse of the country, and threaten to wipe out some of the best families. The Afghan code of honour demands that if a person be killed by his enemy, some relative of the victim must retaliate by slaying the murderer or a member of his family. Now it sometimes happens that the late murderer is deemed a person of more importance than his victim was, and therefore to equalize matters somewhat, another member of the first family must be slain. Things go from bad to worse, other families get implicated, and it often ends in whole villages becoming embroiled, and intertribal fighting taking place. Peace is never secured until vengeance is fully satisfied on both sides. As regards connubial fidelity, the Koran and *Sharia'* know no equality of sex neither does the Afghan. Lax he may be

in his own morals, but he cannot pardon lapse in his women; and his jealousy often expresses itself in acts of the utmost cruelty.

Another characteristic of the Afghan is a deep-rooted sense of his own personal worth. Every man is as good, if not better than his neighbour, and this trait has been hitherto a serious hindrance to national cohesion. All think that they are equally fit to be the chief of their respective tribe, and each chief imagines that he is fit to be ruler of the land. Never indeed did chief more sorely need Heaven for his aid and stay, than the man who would reign in that country and tame Afghans for a day. Every new law is received with suspicion, either as a departure from the old institutions of Islam, or as an encroachment on their independence, love of which amounts almost to an obsession.

As orthodox Sunni Moslems, Afghans are rigid adherents of the *Sharia'* (ecclesiastical law) and the old *sunna* (custom) of Mohammed on which it is based. The people of Christian and civilized states can hardly imagine the difficulties that confront a progressive Moslem government in trying to adapt the old code to modern institutions and requirements. Take for instance the law concerning polygamy. What trouble has not this wrought in the country, and has it not been at the root of most of the disputes and contests for the throne? Afghan law asserts that "if the meanest slave girl bear her lord the king a child, this child shall have the same rights as the child born of the royal wife." This law cannot, however, be taken too seriously, for rights mostly fall to him who is able to secure them for himself, or perhaps to him whose mother is able to secure them by intrigue. And it is here, of course, that the royal wife, with birth, education and riches has the advantage over the poor woman whose only asset is her beauty. Other things being equal, a sort of prescriptive right has been acquired by the eldest son of the first queen. But other things seldom are equal, and the present occupant of the throne is the youngest son

of Habib Ullah's first wife. Of course, the usual intrigues were not lacking if Kabul rumours can be relied on. The Amir's two eldest sons, and Nasr Ullah his eldest brother who were with him at Jelalabad at the time of his death, were accused of being accessories to the crime, and all suffered due punishment. Aman Ullah who was in Kabul at the time could, of course, prove an alibi, and it was he who took proceedings against his uncle and brothers. The various rumours current may be true or may not; in any case a human life does not count for much in Afghanistan, not even the life of a king.

I was privileged while in Kabul to visit one of the Afghan princesses. She was a daughter of the famous Abdur Rahman, and a lady who seemed to have inherited a considerable portion of her father's wit and humour. I shall not easily forget how she entertained me by showing me pictures of various members of her family. "This is my brother Nasr Ullah," she said, "he died in prison." "This is my brother Habib Ullah, he was killed at Jelalabad." "This is my uncle, he also was killed" and so on, and all without remark or lament; only an arch smile in her sparkling intelligent eyes showed what she was thinking. I wanted to ask her a lot of questions, but did not dare; also it would have been useless. Afghanistan is riddled with spies, and no one dares to breathe a word openly against those in power.

The Princess took me round later to see the new knitting factory, which she herself had started. I was very astonished as I entered the first room to see some half dozen beautiful queenly women, richly jewelled, working the knitting machines. They seemed to be princesses from the Arabian Nights, rather than factory girls. I was told afterwards by a European lady that they belonged to high class families, who had come down in the world; and so these ladies were now working in the factory for one rupee a day. But in a country where great and dramatic changes take place so quickly, a temporary downfall need not be taken too much to

heart. It is wiser surely to spend the time dreaming of the good fortune which may be awaiting one round the next corner, or anticipating if not actually planning the overthrow of those to whom one's present adversity is due!

Nearly all the Afghan kings have played with that capricious jade, Dame Fortune, for high stakes, the incomparable Abdur Rahman with the best. He spent eleven years in exile before coming to the throne. He had been a fetter-bound prisoner, a blacksmith, an engineer and a cook; a general, a viceroy and an amir—at one time, a working peasant lacking perhaps his daily bread; at another a great ruler, honoured by the governments of Persia, Russia, and Great Britain. For Aman Ullah, who secured his crown so easily and unexpectedly, adversities doubtless remain in store. His elder brother, whom he kept in prison for a full year until he agreed to abdicate officially, is still alive. His uncle Nasr Ullah, the mullah prince, who was put to death with his consent, has still powerful friends belonging to the Old Afghan party. This party which Aman Ullah constantly irritates by his modern, and (as they deem) anti-religious reform laws, has already reminded him of its existence, for it is they who supported the Khost and other rebels during the recent risings. This party it is which will seek to render it impossible for this liberal-minded monarch to emancipate himself, his house, and his people from the thralldom of the ancient codes and customs of orthodox Islam.

It must not be thought, however, that the Islamic system is wholly to blame for the difficulties with which the Afghan Government finds itself confronted today, for Islam in itself is above the Afghan interpretation of it. It is true that the Koran and Traditions can be interpreted so as to prove an insuperable hindrance to the development and progress of any country, but they are capable also of a broader and less literal interpretation.

The Afghans are Sunnis of the most fanatical type, to whom the *sunna* or customs of Mohammed are sacred.

These customs they call *dastur*, and their being holy is a sufficient reason for adhering rigidly to them, however old fashioned or inconvenient they may prove. *Dastur* is the flower of their religion. Respect for *dastur*, fear of hell, and desire for the pleasures of paradise, are the three ruling motives of their faith.

Another factor in the religious fanaticism of the Afghans, for which Islam proper can not be held responsible, is priestcraft: that is the enormous hold and dangerous influence which the mullahs have on the minds of the people. Islam really recognizes no priesthood; every Moslem has a full right to officiate at religious and social functions such as weddings, funerals, mosque prayers, and religious feasts. Nevertheless, Afghanistan is one of the most priest-ridden countries in the world, and the mullahs not only rule the people, but often defy the monarch. Until quite recently, the mullahs were the sole possessors of any learning, and therefore to them was entrusted the education of the young, and the leadership of the state. They are the defenders of the faith, the exponents of the law, the arbiters in tribal disputes and the inciters to hostility against infidels and heretics. If any one dares to disregard the mullah, he is excommunicated; which means he may not enter the mosque, and can neither be married nor buried with Moslem rites. It is not to be wondered at that the mullahs are feared more than loved by the people, for they are believed to be in possession of great spiritual, and in some cases even magical powers. They are the priests, the doctors, the teachers, and the judges of the land, as well as warriors and courtiers. And because their power depends to a great extent upon the ignorance and consequent superstition of the people, it is to their interest to oppose popular education, and obstruct the work of the present liberal government.

The rulers of Afghanistan have in times past feared the authority of the mullahs, and while seeking their favour on the one hand, have tried to subdue them on the other. They are dangerous enemies, and no government can

long continue that does not know how to manage these proud priests, or disregard popular feeling and fanaticism. Habib Ullah, father of the present Amir, was completely in the hands of the mullah-party. He regarded himself as a sort of Khalifa, King of Islam being his favourite title. At the big annual feast in the Idgah Mosque in Kabul, he acted as Imam or leader in prayer. His friendship with the mullahs cost him something. The "King of Islam" must perforce live in accordance with the Koranic code which allows a man but four wives at a time, and so Habib Ullah was obliged to divorce some of the queens with whom his careful father had provided him. In return for this act of self-denial, he was awarded the title "Light of the Nation and Congregation."

The present Amir, Aman Ullah, has likewise had to yield to public religious sentiment, by suppressing the Ahmadiya movement, and executing two of their leaders. Their doctrine that *jihad* or holy war was only to be carried on in a spiritual sense, could not be tolerated in Afghanistan. In the *Aman-i-Afghan*, a leading newspaper in Kabul, it was stated that the Government could not permit such dangerous teaching, as it was bound to promote dissension and disturbance throughout the country. Protests poured in from all quarters, the European legations, the Ahmadiya community, and various new Islamic Indian newspapers declared that a free and independent Afghanistan ought to give full liberty in matters of religion like other civilized countries. The Kabul paper replied that liberty must be made dependent on and bounded by the standard of civilization attained by the nation in question; and that the religious prejudices of the Afghan people needed to be taken into account. If a new religion threatened to destroy the old faith, or if the preachers of a new faith gave rise to trouble, then restrictions became necessary. *The Civil and Military Gazette* and other Anglo-Indian newspapers made some sharp comments on this, but the Afghan Government is

undoubtedly right from an orthodox Islamic point of view. The more liberal interpretations, and in some cases evasions, of the Koran and *Sharia'* now obtaining in Turkey and others of the more enlightened Moslem lands, are still absolutely unknown in Afghanistan. There the Government feels bound to adhere to the letter of the old Arabic law, and its interpretation according to the orthodox schools of thought. In their hatred of innovations the Old Afghans are not unlike the Wahhabis.

The Afghans' chief mosques, unlike those in India and Turkey, are plain structures, devoid of any ornamentation, because the Prophet is said to have forbidden decorations in building. Except for the tomb of Timur, and the Buddhist remains at Bamian and other places, there are no ancient monuments in Afghanistan. Even the mosque of Babar's famous shrine, the pride of Kabul, is small, bare and insignificant to look at. Thus much for the austere culture of Islam; and the strictly orthodox Afghan capital has never been a seat of art or learning as were Baghdad and Damascus. Mohammed himself poured contempt on poetry, and is said to have consigned to the severest punishment at the last day, the painters and artists who had tried to imitate that which Allah had created.

What problems such a mentality must involve for the newly-founded "Department of Religion and Education" in its endeavours to institute modern schools on Western lines without getting into trouble with the religious leaders of the country! The Young Turks who did not care a scrap for the Faith, managed it well enough; but the Young Afghans, who are, or, at any rate, wish to pose as good Moslems, can not do so without a conflict with their own conscience, and with the Old Afghan party. One cannot therefore but admire the courage of the young Amir, who has, in spite of everything, started two boys' schools in Kabul on modern lines and with European masters. At the same time he has been obliged to keep

the old-fashioned elementary schools still going, where instruction is given by mullahs and moulvis with the Koran as the only class book.

In the higher educational establishments for adults, the curriculum consists, first and foremost, of the Koran, then the *Sharia'*, followed by logic, geometry, rhetoric, genealogy, history, arithmetic and, of course, riding and shooting. Such a course fits the young Afghan to become a priest or a judge, but nothing else. There is no opportunity for him to study physical, agricultural, commercial or technical science, and it is to supply this lack that the two European schools have been started. When the cleverest of the boys have learned sufficient French or German, they are sent to Europe to finish their education. After completing their studies abroad, they return to their own country, and are then expected to apply what they have learned, and to found various institutions on Western models.

The Minister of Education was so kind as to take me over the Kabul schools one day. It was really amusing to see the enthusiasm of those wild boys for science, and behind it all, undoubtedly lay national aspirations to build up a new Afghanistan. It is to be hoped that these two modern schools will be allowed to continue, but the European teachers feel that they are on dangerous ground when it comes to the drawing of diagrams and pictures in the various class books.

Another important point on which the Amir has sought to set aside old traditions and practices, and to give his people the benefits of modern science and civilization is the "Department of Medicine and Hygiene." Under the old regime, the medical science and art of the *hakims* (native doctors) was on a par with that of the Saracen physicians of the Middle Ages. The same restrictions which Mohammedan law laid upon Avicenna and Abdul Latif in Arabia were still in vogue in Afghanistan until a few years ago. Dissections, vivisections, and post-mortems were prohibited and even anatomical diagrams.

Sanitary contrivances were the same as those used and approved by the Prophet himself; and consequently trachoma, dysentery, malaria and syphilis are endemic; while periodic epidemics of cholera, plague, and small-pox rage without meeting any resistance.

One fine day, however, the Amir advertised for and engaged six Italian and twelve German doctors. He got them cheap because it was just after the great war, when everything in Europe was in chaos and misery. But the struggle between the old order and the new was too much for most of them. All the Italians have now left for good, and but five of the Germans still remain at their posts.

Perhaps the difficulties Aman Ullah's Government has to contend with are not fully appreciated by Europeans, or perhaps they are not sufficiently philanthropically inclined to endure situations which at times seem intolerable owing to Afghan inefficiency, corruption or overweening conceit. During my stay in Kabul, I made acquaintance with many clever Europeans in different positions, who had come out as pioneers of civilization, and who in their own way were both idealists and philanthropists. But I did not find one such who was not well nigh in despair, over the conditions under which they had to work, and the whole situation in general.

I left Afghanistan with the conviction that something greater than philanthropy was required to meet the country's need. Surely only those possessed of the Love which is prepared to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things are equipped to participate successfully in any movement for the true uplift of Afghanistan.

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