

memory of Shiraz differed very radically from Herbert's, as indeed befitted the great scholar that he was:

"Hitherto I have spoken only of the lighter aspect of Persian life in Shiraz; of social gatherings where wine and music, dance and song, beguiled away the soft spring days, or the moonlit nights. It is time that I should turn to other memories - gatherings where no wine flowed and no music sounded; where grave faces, illumined with the light of inward conviction, and eyes gleaming with unquenchable faith, surrounded me; where the strains of the rebeck were replaced by low, earnest tones speaking of God, of the New Light, of pains resolutely endured, and of triumph confidently expected. The memory of those assemblies can never fade from my mind; the recollection of those faces and those tones no time can efface."

For Shiraz throughout its long history has been more than a city of great political power and material grandeur;

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it has also been a city of saints and scholars, as will be told hereafter, and it was the saints and scholars of Shiraz, still faithful to a millennial tradition in the last decades of the nineteenth century, who engaged the youthful Browne's most lively and enduring admiration.

At Shiraz on October 20, 1819, had been born to a family of merchants Saiyid Ali Muhammad, proclaimed on the night of May 23, 1844, to be the Bab, gateway to the divine truth. Six years later, on July 9, 1850, by order of Nasir al-Din Shah he was executed by a firing squad at Tabriz. In the brief intervening years he had by fluent writing and fervent preaching founded a new religion, which, despite subsequent schisms and bitter sectarian quarrels, still claims many adherents - a religion with its own unhappy yet triumphant history of persecution and martyrdom. The fame of the Bab and his faithful followers had long since fired Browne's imagination, and "those who have followed me thus far on my journey will remember how, after long and fruitless search, a fortunate chance at length brought me into contact with the Babis at Isfahan. They will remember also that the Babi apostle to whom I was introduced promised to notify my desire for fuller instruction to his fellow-believers at Shiraz, and that he further communicated to me the name of one whose house formed one of their principal resorts. I had no sooner reached Shiraz than I began to consider how I should, without attracting attention or arousing comment, put myself

in communication with the person so designated, who occupied a post of some importance in the public service which I will not more clearly specify. His name, too, I suppress for obvious reasons. Whenever I have occasion to allude to him, I shall speak of him as Mirza Muhammad."

In such an atmosphere of mystery and conspiracy, so

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characteristic of the religious history of Persia, Browne very soon succeeded in meeting "Mirza Muhammad," to whose house he was taken by Mirza Ali, a young Babi and old friend from Europe. "He was not in when we arrived, but appeared shortly, and welcomed me very cordially. After a brief interval we were joined by another guest, whose open countenance and frank greeting greatly predisposed me in his favour. This was the scribe and missionary, Haji Mirza Hasan He was shortly followed by the young Seyyid who had visited me on the previous day, and another much older Seyyid of very quiet, gentle appearance, who, as I afterwards learned, was related to the Bab, and was therefore one of the Afnan ('Branches') - a title given by the Babis to all related, within certain degrees of affinity, to the founder of their faith." Browne relates how he was "at first somewhat at a loss how to begin, especially as several servants were standing about outside, watching and listening. I enquired of Mirza Ali if I might speak freely before these, whereupon he signified to Mirza Muhammad that they should be dismissed I then proceeded to set forth what I had heard of the Bab, his gentleness and patience, the cruel fate which had overtaken him, and the unflinching courage wherewith he and his followers, from the greatest to the least, had endured the merciless torments inflicted on them by their enemies. 'It is this,' I concluded, 'which has made me so desirous to know what you believe; for a faith which can inspire a fortitude so admirable must surely contain some noble principle.'"

Long and intricate discussions followed, fully reported by a memory retentive far beyond the common run. "This is the special character of the prophetic word; it fulfils itself; it creates; it triumphs. Kings and rulers strove to

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extinguish the word of Christ, but they could not; and now kings and rulers make it their pride that they are Christ's servants. Against all opposition, against all persecution, unsupported

by human might, what the prophet says comes to pass. This is the true miracle, the greatest possible miracle, and indeed the only miracle which is a proof to future ages and distant peoples. Those who are privileged to meet the prophet may indeed be convinced in other ways, but for those who have not seen him his word is the evidence on which conviction must rest. If Christ raised the dead, you were not a witness of it; if Muhammad cleft the moon asunder, I was not there to see. No one can really believe a religion merely because miracles are ascribed to its founder, for are they not ascribed to the founder of every religion by its votaries? But when a man arises amongst a people, untaught and unsupported, yet speaking a word which causes empires to change, hierarchies to fall, and thousands to die willingly in obedience to it, that is a proof absolute and positive that the word spoken is from God. This is the proof to which we point in support of our religion."

Browne, having argued many points back and forth, suddenly realized that "it was now past sunset, and dusk was drawing on, so I was reluctantly compelled to depart homewards. On the whole, I was well satisfied with my first meeting with the Babis of Shiraz, and looked forward to many similar conferences during my stay in Persia. They had talked freely and without restraint, had received me with every kindness, and appeared desirous of affording me every facility for comprehending their doctrines; and although some of my enquiries had not met with answers as clear as I could have desired, I was agreeably impressed with the fairness, courtesy, and freedom from

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prejudice of my new acquaintances. Especially it struck me that their knowledge of Christ's teaching and the gospels was much greater than that commonly possessed by the Musulmans, and I observed with pleasure that they regarded the Christians with a friendliness very gratifying to behold." Many further conversations followed, the upshot of which was that Browne not only wrote voluminously on the Babis through the remainder of his life and published many of their fundamental writings, but also put together a collection of Babi scriptures and documents, bequeathed on his death in 1926 to Cambridge University Library, which will prove invaluable to all future researchers.

"The memory of those assemblies can never fade from

my mind; the recollection of those faces and those tones
no time can efface. I have gazed with awe on the workings
of a mighty Spirit, and I marvel whereunto it tends. O
people of the Bab! Sorely persecuted, compelled to silence,
but steadfast now as at Sheykh Tabarsi and Zanjan, what
destiny is concealed for you behind the veil of the Future?"
In Shiraz, Browne had witnessed manifestations of
the human psyche which persuaded him that a great new
religion had been born. He lived long enough to realize
that Babism, and Behaism its offshoot, for all their gloriously
tragic beginnings were little likely in the end to
"cause empires to change, hierarchies to fall." Yet he had
seen, and was endowed with the power to describe, the
laying bare of the very soul of Persia, in those secret rendezvous
in Shiraz. Century after century, Persia had been
shaken by the mysterious forces of religious enthusiasm.
Generation after generation had produced its saints, its
ecstatics, its heresiarchs, its passionate defenders of the
faith, its quietistic devotees, its obscure anchorites, its

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ardent martyrs. Perhaps - who can tell? - he saw all these wonders
for the last time, so great a change has been wrought
by materialist influences penetrating from without. It is
because the things Browne witnessed in 1887 were so closely
akin to the Shiraz of Sa'di and Hafiz, and so far removed
from the Shiraz of today, that his story truly belongs to
the great age of Persia, and makes a fit frontispiece to the
narrative now to be related....

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